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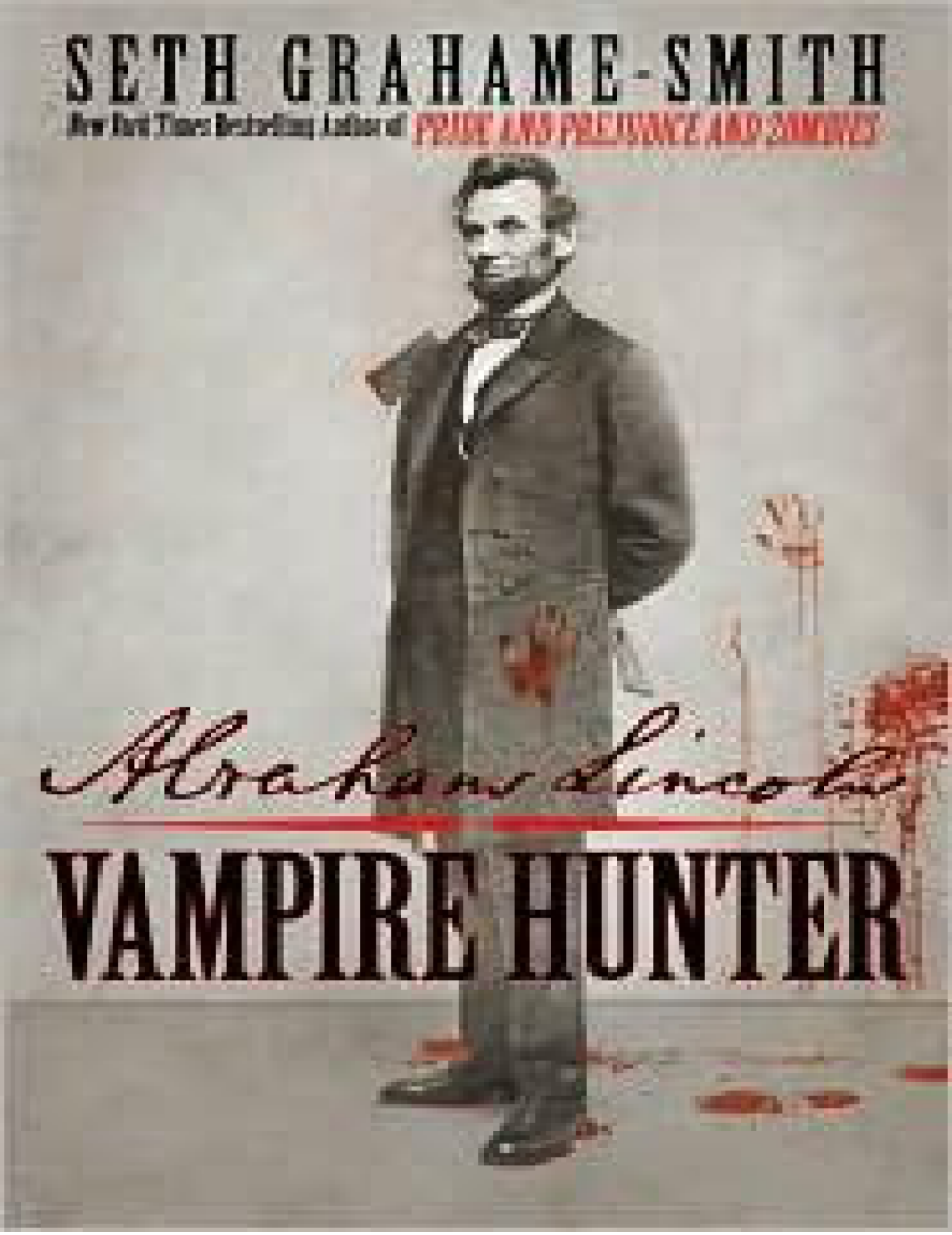

Abraham Lincoln VAMPIRE HUNTER

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FACTS

1. For over 250 years, between 1607 and 1865, vampires thrived in the shadows of America. Few humans believed in them.

2. Abraham Lincoln was one of the gifted vampire hunters of his day, and kept a secret journal about his lifelong war against them.

3. Rumors of the journal's existence have long been a favorite topic among historians and Lincoln biographers. Most dismiss it as myth.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

Introduction

I cannot speak of the things I have seen, nor seek comfort for the pain I feel. If I did, this nation would descend into a deeper kind of madness, or think its president mad. The truth, I am afraid, must live as paper and ink. Hidden and forgotten until every man named here has passed to dust.

—Abraham Lincoln, in a journal entry
December 3rd, 1863

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

I

I was still bleeding… my hands shaking. As far as I knew, he was still here—watching me. Somewhere, across a vast gulf of space, a television was on. A man was speaking about unity.

None of it mattered.

The books laid out in front of me were the only things now. The ten leather-bound books of varying size—each one a different shade of black or brown. Some merely old and worn. Others barely held together by their cracked covers, with pages that seemed like they'd crumble if turned by anything stronger than a breath. Beside them was a bundle of letters held tightly by a red rubber band. Some with burnt edges. Others as yellowed as the cigarette filters scattered on the basement floor below. The only standout from these antiques was a single sheet of gleaming white paper. On one side, the names of eleven people I didn't know. No phone numbers. No e-mail. Just the addresses of nine men and two women, and a message scrawled at the bottom of the page:

Expecting you.

Somewhere that man was still speaking. Colonists… hope… Selma.

The book in my hands was the smallest of the ten, and easily the most fragile. Its faded brown cover had been scraped and stained and worn away. The brass buckle that once kept its secrets safe had long since broken off. Inside, every square inch of paper was covered with ink—some of it as dark as the day it dried; some of it so faded that I could barely make it out. In all, there were 118 double-sided, handwritten pages clinging to its spine. They were filled with private longings; theories; strategies; crude drawings of men with strange faces. They were filled with secondhand histories and detailed lists. As I read them, I saw the author's penmanship evolve from the overcautious script of a child to the tightly packed scribbling of a young man.

I finished reading the last page, looked over my shoulder to make sure I was still alone, and turned back to the first. I had to read it again. Right now, before reason turned its dogs on the dangerous beliefs that were beginning to march through my mind.

The little book began with these seven absurd, fascinating

words:

This is the Journal of Abraham Lincoln.

Rhinebeck is one of those upstate towns that time forgot. A town where family-owned shops and familiar faces line the streets, and the oldest inn in America (where, as any townie will proudly tell you, General Washington himself once laid his wigless head) still offers its comforts at reasonable prices. It's a town where people give each other homemade quilts and use woodstoves to heat their homes; and where I have witnessed, on more than one occasion, an apple pie cooling on a windowsill. The place belongs in a snow globe.

Like most of Rhinebeck, the five-and-dime on East Market Street is a living piece of a dying past. Since 1946, the locals have depended on it for everything from egg timers to hem tape to pencils to Christmas toys. If we don't sell it, you don't need it, boasts the sun-beaten sign in the front window. And if you need it anyway, we'll order it. Inside, between checkered linoleum and unflattering fluorescents, you'll find all the sundries of earth bursting, organized by bin. Prices written in grease pencil. Debit cards begrudgingly accepted. This was my home, from eight-thirty in the morning to five-thirty at night. Six days a week. Every week.

I'd always known I'd end up in the store after graduation, just like I had every summer since I was fifteen. I wasn't family in the strictest sense, but Jan and Al had always treated me like one of their kids—giving me a job when I needed it most; throwing me a little pocket money while I was away at school. The way I saw it, I owed them six solid months, June through Christmas. That was the plan. Six months of working in the store by day, and working on my novel nights and weekends. Plenty of time to finish the first draft and give it a good polish. Manhattan was only an hour and a half by train, and that's where I'd go when I was done, with four or five pounds of unsolicited, proofread opportunity under my arm. Goodbye, Hudson Valley. Hello, lecture circuit.

Nine years later I was still in the store.

Somewhere in the middle of getting married, surviving a car accident, having a baby, abandoning my novel, starting and abandoning half a dozen others, having another baby, and trying to stay on top of the bills, something wholly unexpected and depressingly typical happened: I stopped caring about my writing, and started caring about everything else: The kids. The marriage. The mortgage. The store. I seethed at the sight of locals shopping at the CVS down the street. I bought a computer to help track

inventory. Mostly, I looked for new ways to bring people through the door. When the used bookstore in Red Hook closed, I bought some of their stock and put a lending shelf in the back. Raffles. Clearance sales. Wi-Fi. Anything to get them through that door. Every year I tried something new. And every year, we barely scraped by.

Henry * had been coming for a year or so before we got around to talking. We'd exchanged the expected pleasantries; nothing more. "Have a good one." "See you next time." I only knew his name because I'd heard it through the Market Street grapevine. The story was he'd bought one of the bigger places off of Route 9G, and had an army of local handymen sprucing it up. He was a little younger than me—maybe twenty-seven or so, with messy dark hair, a year-round tan, and a different pair of sunglasses for every occasion. I could tell he was money. His clothes screamed it: vintage T-shirts, wool blazers, jeans that cost more than my car. But he wasn't like the other money that came in. The asshole weekenders who liked to gush about our "cute" little town and our "adorable" little store, walking right past our No Food or Drink Please sign with their oversize cups of hazelnut coffee, and never spending a dime. Henry was courteous. Quiet. Best of all, he never left without dropping less than fifty bucks—most of it on the throwbacks you can only pick up in specialty stores these days—bars of Lifebuoy, tins of Angelus Shoe Wax. He came in, paid cash, and left. Have a good one. See you next time. And then, one day in the fall of 2007, I looked up from my spiral notebook and there he was. Standing on the other side of the counter—staring at me like I'd just said something revolting.

"Why did you abandon it?"

"I… I'm sorry?"

Henry motioned to the notebook in front of me. I always kept one by the register, in the event that any brilliant ideas or observations popped in (they never did, but semper fi, you know?). Over the last four hours, I'd jotted half a page of one-line story ideas, none of which warranted a second line. The bottom half of the page had descended into a doodle of a tiny man giving the middle finger to a giant, angry eagle with razor-sharp talons. Beneath it, the caption: To Mock a Killing Bird. Sadly, this was the best idea I'd had in weeks.

"Your writing. I was curious as to why you abandoned it."

Now it was me staring at him. For whatever reason, I was suddenly struck by the thought of a man carrying a flashlight—rifling through the cobwebbed shelves of a dark warehouse. It wasn't a pleasant thought.

"Sorry, but I don't—"

"Understand, no. No, I apologize. It was rude of me to interrupt you."

Jesus… now I felt compelled to apologize for his apology.

"Not at all. It's just… what gave you—"

"You seemed like someone who writes."

He pointed to the lending shelf in the back.

"You obviously have an appreciation for books. I see you writing here from time to time… I assumed it was a passion. I was just curious as to why you hadn't pursued it."

Reasonable. A little pompous (what, just because I'm working in a five-and-dime, I'm not pursuing my passion?), but reasonable enough to let some of the air back into the room. I gave him the honest, depressingly typical answer, which amounted to "life is what happens while you're busy making other plans." That led to a discussion about John Lennon, which led to a discussion about The Beatles, which led to a discussion about Yoko Ono, which led nowhere. We talked. I asked him how he liked the area. How his house was coming. What kind of work he did. He gave me satisfactory answers to all of these. But even as he did—even as we stood there chatting politely, just a couple of young guys shooting the breeze—I couldn't avoid the feeling that there was another conversation going on. A conversation that I wasn't participating in. I could feel Henry's questions becoming increasingly personal. I could feel my answers doing the same. He asked about my wife. My kids. My writing. He asked about my parents. My regrets. I answered them all. I knew it was strange. I didn't care. I wanted to tell him. This young, rich guy with messy hair and overpriced jeans and dark glasses. This guy whose eyes I'd never seen. Whom I hardly knew. I wanted to tell him everything. It just came out, like he'd dislodged a stone that had been stuck in my mouth for years—a stone that kept all of my secrets held back in a reservoir. Losing my mom when I was a kid. The problems with my dad. Running away. My writing. My doubts. The annoying certainty that there was more than this. Our struggles with money. My struggles with depression. The times I thought about running away. The times I thought about killing myself.

I hardly remember saying half of it. Maybe I didn't.

At some point, I asked Henry to read my unfinished novel. I was appalled by the thought of him or anyone reading it. I was even appalled by the idea of reading it myself. But I asked him anyway.

"No need," he answered.

It was (to that point) the strangest conversation of my life. By the time Henry excused himself and left, I felt like I'd covered ten miles in a flat-out sprint.

It was never that way again. The next time he came in, we exchanged the expected pleasantries; nothing more. Have a good one. See you next time. He bought his soap and shoe polish. He paid cash. This went on. He came in less and less.

When Henry came in for the last time, in January of 2008, he carried a small package—wrapped in brown paper and tied up with twine. Without a word, he set it next to the register. His gray sweater and crimson scarf were lightly dusted with snow, and his sunglasses speckled with tiny water droplets. He didn't bother taking them off. This didn't surprise me. There was a white envelope on top of the package with my name written on it—some of the ink had mixed with melting snow and begun to bleed.

I reached under the counter and killed the volume on the little TV I kept there for Yankees games. Today it was tuned to the news. It was the morning of the Iowa primary, and Barack Obama was running neck and neck with Hillary Clinton. Anything to pass the time.

"I would like you to have this."

For a moment, I looked at him like he'd said that in Norwegian.

"Wait, this is for me? What's the—"

"I'm sorry, but I have a car waiting. Read the note first. I'll be in touch."

And that was it. I watched him walk out the door and into the cold, wondering if he ever let anyone finish a sentence, or if it was just me.

II

The package sat under the counter for the rest of the day. I was dying to open the damned thing, but since I had no idea who this guy really was, I wasn't about to risk unwrapping a blow-up doll or kilo of black tar heroin at the same moment some Girl Scout decided to walk in. I let my curiosity burn until the streets turned dark and Mrs. Kallop finally settled on the darker of the green yarns (after an excruciating ninety minutes of debate), then locked the doors a few minutes early. To hell with the stragglers tonight. Christmas was over, and it was deadly slow anyway. Besides, everybody was home watching the Obama-Hillary drama play out in Iowa. I decided to sneak a cigarette in the basement before heading home to catch the results. I picked up Henry's gift, killed the fluorescents, and cranked up the TV's speaker. If there was any election news, I'd hear it echoing down the staircase.

There wasn't much to the basement. Other than a few boxes of overflow inventory against the walls, it was a mostly empty room with a filthy concrete floor and a single hanging forty-watt bulb. There was an old metal "tanker" desk against one wall with the inventory computer on it, a two-drawer file cabinet where we kept some records, and a couple of folding chairs. A water heater. A fuse panel. Two small windows that peeked into the alley above. More than anything, it was where I smoked during the cold winter months. I pulled a folding chair up to the desk, lit one, and began to untie the twine at the top of the neatly wrapped—

The letter.

The thought just popped in there, like one of those brilliant ideas or observations I kept the notebook around for. I was supposed to read the letter first. I found the Swiss Army key chain in my pants pocket ($7.20 plus tax—cheaper than you'll find anywhere else in Dutchess County, guaranteed) and opened the envelope with a flick of the wrist. Inside was a single folded piece of gleaming white paper with a list of names and addresses typed out on one side. On the other, a handwritten note:

There are some conditions I must ask you to agree to before opening this package:

First, understand that it is not a gift, but a loan. I will, at a time of my choosing, ask you to return these items. On that point, I need your solemn promise that you will protect them at all cost, and treat them with the same care and respect you would afford any item of tremendous value.

Second, the contents of this package are of an extremely sensitive nature. I must ask that you not share or discuss them with anyone other than myself and the eleven individuals listed opposite until you have received my permission to do so.

Third, these items are being lent to you with the expectation that you will write a manuscript about them, of, let us say, substantial length, and subject to my approval. You may take as much time as you wish. Upon the satisfactory completion of this manuscript, you will be fairly compensated.

If you cannot meet any of these conditions for any reason, please stop and wait to be contacted by me. However, if you agree, then you may proceed.

I believe it is your purpose to do so.

—H

Well, shit… there was no way I wasn't opening it now.

I tore the paper off, uncovering a bundle of letters held tightly by a red rubber band, and ten leather-bound books. I

opened the book at the top of the pile. As I did, a lock of blonde hair fell onto the desk. I picked it up, studied it, and twirled it in my fingers as I read a random sliver from the pages it'd been pressed between:

… wish I could but vanish from this earth, for there is no love left in it. She has been taken from me, and with her, all hope of a…

I skimmed through the rest of the first book, spellbound. Somewhere upstairs, a woman was listing off the names of counties. Pages and pages—every inch filled with tightly packed handwriting. With dates like November 6th, 1835; June 3rd, 1841. With drawings and lists. With names like Speed, Berry, and Salem. With a word that kept showing up, over and over:

Vampire.

The other books were the same. Only the dates and penmanship changed. I skimmed them all.

… there that I saw, for the first time, men and children sold as… precautions, for we knew that Baltimore was teeming with… was a sin I could not forgive. I was forced to demote the…

Two things were obvious: they were all written by the same person, and they were all very, very old. Beyond that, I had no idea what they were, or what would've compelled Henry to lend them to me. And then I came across the first page of the first book, and those seven absurd words: This is the Journal of Abraham Lincoln. I laughed out loud.

It all made sense. I was amazed. Completely, kicked-in-the-teeth amazed. Not because I was holding the Great Emancipator's long-lost journal in my hands, but because I had so thoroughly misjudged a man. I'd taken Henry's quietness to mean he was reclusive. I'd taken his fleeting interest in my life to mean he was outgoing. But now it was obvious. The dude was clearly out of his mind. Either that, or messing with mine. Playing some kind of hoax—the kind that rich guys with too much time on their hands play. But then, it couldn't be a hoax, could it? Who would go through this much trouble? Or was it—was this Henry's own abandoned novel? An elaborately packaged writing project? Now I felt terrible. Yes. Yes, of course that's what it was. I looked through the books again, expecting to see little hints of the twenty-first century. Little cracks in the armor. There weren't any—at least as far as I could tell on first glance. Besides, something kept nagging at me: if this was a pet writing project, why the eleven names and addresses? Why had Henry asked me to write about the books, instead of asking me to rewrite them? The needle began to lean toward "crazy" again. Was it possible? Did

he really believe that these ten little books were the—no, he couldn't possibly believe that. Right?

I couldn't wait to tell my wife. Couldn't wait to share the sheer insanity of this with someone else. In a long line of small town psychos, this guy took the cake. I stood, gathered the books and letters, crushed the cigarette under my heel, and turned to—

Something was standing six inches from me.

I staggered backward and tripped over the folding chair, falling and banging the back of my head against the corner of the old tanker desk. My eyes were thrown out of focus. I could already feel the warmth of the blood running through my hair. Something leaned over me. Its eyes were a pair of black marbles. Its skin a translucent collage of pulsing blue veins. And its mouth —its mouth could barely contain its wet, glassy fangs.

It was Henry.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said. "I just need you to understand."

He lifted me off the ground by my collar. I could feel the blood running down the back of my neck.

I fainted.

Have a good one. See you next time.

III

I've been instructed not to get into the specifics of where Henry took me that night, or what he showed me. Suffice it to say it made me physically ill. Not from any horrors I may have witnessed, but from the guilt that I'd been a party to them, willing or not.

I was with him for less than an hour. In that short time, my understanding of the world was torn down to its foundation. The way I thought about death, and space, and God… all irrevocably changed. In that short time, I came to believe—in no uncertain terms—something that would've sounded insane only an hour before:

Vampires exist.

I didn't sleep for a week—first from terror, then excitement. I stayed late at the store every night, poring over Abraham Lincoln's books and letters. Checking their incredible claims against the hard "facts" of heralded Lincoln biographies. I papered the basement walls with printouts of old photographs. Time lines. Family trees. I wrote into the early morning hours.

For the first two months, my wife was concerned. For the second two she was suspicious. By the sixth month we'd separated. I feared for my safety. My children's safety. My sanity. I had so many questions, but Henry was nowhere to be found.

Eventually I worked up the courage to interview the eleven "individuals" on his list. Some were merely reluctant. Others hostile. But with their help (begrudging as it was), I slowly began to stitch together the hidden history of vampires in America. Their role in the birth, growth, and near death of our nation. And the one man who saved that nation from their tyranny.

For some seventeen months, I sacrificed everything for those ten leather-bound books. That bundle of letters held tightly by a red rubber band. In some ways they were the best months of my life. Every morning, I woke up on that inflatable mattress in the store basement with a purpose. With the knowledge that I was doing something truly important, even if I was doing it completely, desperately alone. Even if I'd lost my mind.

Vampires exist. And Abraham Lincoln was one of the greatest vampire hunters of his age. His journal—beginning in his twelfth year and continuing to the day of his assassination—is an altogether astonishing, heartbreaking, and revolutionary document. One that casts new light on many of the seminal events in American history and adds immeasurable complexity to a man already thought to be unusually complex.

There are more than 15,000 books about Lincoln. His childhood. His mental health. His sexuality. His views on race, religion, and litigation. Most of them contain a great deal of truth. Some have even hinted at the existence of a "secret diary" and an "obsession with the occult." Yet not one of them contains a single word concerning the central struggle of his life. A struggle that eventually spilled onto the battlefields of the Civil War.

It turns out that the towering myth of Honest Abe, the one ingrained in our earliest grade school memories, is inherently dishonest. Nothing more than a patchwork of half-truths and omissions.

What follows nearly ruined my life.

What follows, at last, is the truth.

—Seth Grahame-Smith

Rhinebeck, New York

January 2010

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

PART I

BOY

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

ONE

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

Exceptional Child

In this sad world of ours, sorrow comes to all; and, to the young, it comes with bitterest agony, because it takes them unawares.

—Abraham Lincoln, in a letter to Fanny McCullogh
December 23rd, 1862

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

I

The boy had been crouched so long that his legs had fallen asleep beneath him—but he dared not move now. For here, in a small clearing in the frostbitten forest, were the creatures he had waited so long to see. The creatures he'd been sent to kill. He bit down on his lip to keep his teeth from chattering, and aimed his father's flintlock rifle exactly as he'd been taught. The body, he remembered. The body, not the neck. Quietly, carefully he pulled the hammer back and pointed the barrel at his target, a large male who'd fallen behind the others. Decades later, the boy would recall what happened next.

I hesitated. Not out of a conflict of conscience, but for the fear that my rifle had gotten too wet, and thus wouldn't fire. However, this fear proved unfounded, for when I pulled the trigger, the stock hit my shoulder with such force as to knock me clean onto my back.

Turkeys scattered in every direction as Abraham Lincoln, seven years old, picked himself off the snow-covered ground. Rising to his feet, he brought his fingers to the strange warmth he felt on his chin. "I'd bitten my lip clean through," he wrote. "But I hardly gave a holler. I was desperate to know if I had hit the poor devil or not."

He had. The large male flapped its wings wildly, pushing itself through the snow in small circles. Abe watched from a distance, "afraid it might somehow rise up and tear me to pieces." The flapping of wings; the dragging of feathers through snow. These were the only sounds in the world. They were joined by the crunching beneath Abe's feet as he found his nerve and approached. The wings beat less forcefully now.

It was dying.

He had shot it clean through the neck. The head hung at an unnatural angle—dragged across the ground as the bird continued to thrash. The body, not the neck. With every beat of its heart, blood poured from the wound and onto the snow, where it mixed with the dark droplets from Abe's bleeding lip and the tears that had already begun to fall down his face.

It gasped for breath, but could draw none, and its eyes wore a kind of fear I had never seen. I stood over the miserable bird for

what seemed a twelvemonth, pleading with God to make its wings fall silent. Begging His forgiveness for so injuring a creature that had shown me no malice; presented no threat to my person or prosperity. Finally it was still, and, plucking up my courage, I dragged it through a mile of forest and laid it at my mother's feet —my head hung low so as to hide my tears.

Abraham Lincoln would never take another life. And yet he would become one of the greatest killers of the nineteenth century.

The grieving boy didn't sleep a wink that night. "I could think only of the injustice I had done another living thing, and the fear I had seen in its eyes as the promise of life slipped away." Abe refused to eat any part of his kill, and lived on little more than bread as his mother, father, and older sister picked the carcass clean over the next two weeks. There is no record of their reaction to this hunger strike, but it must have been seen as eccentric. After all, to willingly go without food, as a matter of principle, was a remarkable choice for anyone in those days—particularly a boy who had been born and raised on America's frontier.

But then, Abe Lincoln had always been different.

America was still in its infancy when the future president was born on February 12th, 1809—a mere thirty-three years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Many of the giants of the American Revolution—Robert Treat Paine, Benjamin Rush, and Samuel Chase—were still alive. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson wouldn't resume their tumultuous friendship for another three years, and wouldn't die for another seventeen—incredibly, on the same day. The Fourth of July.

Those first American decades were ones of seemingly limitless growth and opportunity. By the time Abe Lincoln was born, residents of Boston and Philadelphia had seen their cities double in size in less than twenty years. New York's population had tripled in the same amount of time. The cities were becoming livelier, more prosperous. "For every farmer, there are two haberdashers; for every blacksmith, an opera house," joked Washington Irving in his New York periodical, Salmagundi.

But as the cities became more crowded, they became more dangerous. Like their counterparts in London, Paris, and Rome, America's city dwellers had come to expect a certain amount of crime. Theft was by far the most common offense. With no fingerprints on file or cameras to fear, thieves were limited only by their conscience and cunning. Muggings hardly warranted a mention in the local papers, unless the victim was a person of

note.

There's a story of an elderly widow named Agnes Pendel Brown, who lived with her longtime butler (nearly as old as she, and deaf as a stone) in a three-story brick mansion on Amsterdam Avenue. On December 2nd, 1799, Agnes and her butler turned in for the night—he on the first floor, she on the third. When they awoke the next morning, every piece of furniture, every work of art, every gown, serving dish, and candlestick holder (candles included) was gone. The only things the light-footed burglars left were the beds in which Agnes and her butler slept.

There was also the occasional murder. Before the Revolutionary War, homicides had been exceedingly rare in America's cities (it's impossible to provide exact numbers, but a review of three Boston newspapers between 1775 and 1780 yields mention of only eleven cases, ten of which were promptly solved). Most of these were so-called honor killings, such as duels or family squabbles. In most cases, no charges were brought. The laws of the early nineteenth century were vague and, with no regular police force to speak of, loosely enforced. It's worth noting that killing a slave was not considered murder, no matter the circumstances. It was merely "destruction of property."

Immediately after America won its independence, something strange began to happen. The murder rate in its cities started to rise dramatically, almost overnight. Unlike the honor killings of years past, these murders seemed random; senseless. Between 1802 and 1807, there were an incredible 204 unsolved homicides in New York City alone. Homicides with no witnesses, no motive, and often no discernible cause of death. Because the investigators (most of whom were untrained volunteers) kept no records, the only surviving clues come from a handful of faded newspaper articles. One in particular, from the New York Spectator, captures the panic that had enveloped the city by July of 1806.

A Mr. Stokes, of 210 Tenth Street, happen'd upon the poor Victim, a mulatto Woman, whilst on his morning constitutional. The Gentleman remark'd that her eyes were wide open, and her body quite stiff, as if dry'd in the sun. A Constable by name of McLeay inform'd me that no blood was found near the unfortunate soul, nor on her garments, and that her only wound was a small score on the wrist. She is the forty-second to meet such an end this year. The Honorable Dewitt Clinton, Mayor, respectfully advizes the good citizenry to prolong their vigilance until the answerable scoundrel is captur'd. Women and Children are urg'd to walk with a Gentleman companion, and Gentlemen are urg'd to walk in pairs after dark.

The scene was eerily similar to a dozen others reported that summer. No trauma. No blood. Open eyes and rigid body. The face a mask of terror. A pattern emerged among the victims: they were free blacks, vagrants, prostitutes, travelers, and the mentally impaired—people with little or no connection to the city, no family, and whose murders were unlikely to incite angry mobs seeking justice. And New York was hardly alone in its troubles. Similar articles filled the papers of Boston and Philadelphia that summer, and similar rumors filled the mouths of their panicked populations. There was talk of shadowy madmen. Of foreign spies.

There was even talk of vampires.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

II

Sinking Springs Farm was about as far from New York City as one could get in early nineteenth-century America. Despite its name, the 300-acre "farm" was mostly heavily wooded land—and its rocky eastern Kentucky soil made the prospects of bumper crops unlikely at best. Thomas Lincoln, thirty-one years old, had acquired it for a $200 promissory note in the months before Abe was born. A carpenter by trade, Thomas hastily built a one-room cabin on his new land. It measured all of eighteen by twenty feet, with a hard dirt floor that was cold to the touch year-round. When it rained, water leaked through the roof in bucketfuls. When the wind howled, drafts forced their way through countless cracks in the walls. It was in these humble circumstances, on an unseasonably mild Sunday morning, that the sixteenth president of the United States came into the world. It's said that he didn't cry when he was born, but that he merely stared at his mother, quizzically, and then smiled at her.

Abe would have no memory of Sinking Springs. When he was two, a dispute arose over the deed to the land, so Thomas moved his family ten miles north, to the smaller, more fertile Knob Creek Farm. Despite the much-improved soil, Thomas—who could have made a comfortable living selling corn and grain to nearby settlers—plowed less than an acre of land.

He was an illiterate, indolent man who could not so much as sign his name until instructed by my mother. He had not a scrap of ambition in him… not the slightest interest in bettering his circumstances, or in providing for his family beyond the barest necessities. He never planted a single row more than was needed to keep our bellies from aching, or sought a single penny more than was needed to keep the simplest clothes on our backs.

It was an unduly harsh assessment, written by a forty-one-year-old Abe on the day of his father's funeral (which he had chosen not to attend, and perhaps felt a pang of guilt over). While no one would ever accuse Thomas Lincoln of being "driven," he seems to have been a reliable, if not bountiful, provider. That he never abandoned his family in times of desperate hardship and grief, or abandoned the frontier for the comforts of city life (as many of his contemporaries did), speaks to his character. And

while he didn't always understand or approve of his son's pursuits, he always permitted them (eventually). However, Abe would never be able to forgive him for the tragedy that would transform both of their lives.

Typical of the times, Thomas Lincoln's life had been one of continual struggle and frequent tragedy. Born in 1778, he moved from Virginia to Kentucky with his father, Abraham, and mother, Bathsheba, while still a child. When he was eight, Thomas saw his father murdered before his eyes. It was spring, and Abraham Sr. was busy clearing land to be planted, "when he was waylaid by a party of Shawnee savages." Thomas watched, helpless, as his father was bludgeoned to death—his throat cut and scalp taken. What (if anything) provoked the attack, or why his own life was spared, he couldn't say. Whatever the reasons, life was never the same for Thomas Lincoln. With no inheritance, he was left to wander from town to town, toiling in an endless series of odd jobs. He apprenticed with a carpenter, served as a prison guard, and rode flatboats on the Mississippi and Sangamon Rivers. He felled trees, plowed fields, and attended church when he could. There is no evidence that he ever set foot in a schoolhouse.

This wholly unremarkable life would have surely escaped the notice of history had Thomas not ventured into Elizabethtown one day when he was twenty-eight and, by chance, laid eyes on the young daughter of a Kentucky farmer. Their marriage, on June 12th, 1806, would change the shape of history in ways neither could have dreamed.

By all accounts, Nancy Hanks was a bright, gentle, and handsome woman who had a "remarkable" way with words (but seldom spoke among new acquaintances on account of painful shyness). She was literate, having enjoyed the formal education that her son never would. Nancy was a resourceful woman, and though books were hard to come by in the Kentucky wilderness, she always managed to have at least one borrowed or begged tome around for those rare moments when all the work of the day was done. Beginning when he was barely more than an infant, she would read Abe anything she could get her hands on: Voltaire's Candide, Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, the poetry of Keats and Byron. But it was the Bible that young Abraham loved above all others. The attentive toddler would sit on her lap, thrilling to the larger-than-life stories of the Old Testament: David and Goliath, Noah's ark, the plagues of Egypt. He was especially fascinated by the tale of Job, the righteous man who had everything taken from him, every curse, sorrow, and betrayal leveled at him, yet continued to love and praise God. "He might have been a priest," a childhood

friend would write years later in an election pamphlet, “if life had been kinder to him.”

Knob Creek Farm was about as tough a place to live as one could find in the early 1800s. In the spring, frequent thunderstorms flooded the creek and turned crops into fields of waist-deep mud. In the winter, all color drained from the frozen landscape, and the trees became twisted fingers rattling against each other in the wind. It was here that Abe would experience many of his earliest memories: chasing his older sister, Sarah, through acres of blue ash and shagbark hickory; clinging to the back of a pony for a gentle summer ride; splitting kindling with a small ax beside his father. It was also here that he would experience the first of many devastating losses in his life.

When Abe was three, Nancy Lincoln gave birth to a boy christened Thomas, like his father. Sons were a double blessing to frontier families, and the elder Thomas no doubt looked to the day when he would have two able-bodied boys to share the work with. But those dreams were short-lived. The baby died just shy of a month old. Abe would write about it twenty years later, before he had lived to bury two of his own sons.

As for my own grief, I do not recall. I was perhaps too young to comprehend the meaning or irrevocability of it. However, I will never forget my mother and father’s torment. To describe it would be an exercise in futility. It is the sort of suffering that cannot be done justice with words. I can say only this—that I suspect it is an anguish from which one never recovers. A walking death.

It’s impossible to know what killed Thomas Lincoln Jr. The common causes ranged from dehydration, to pneumonia, to low birth weight. Congenital and chromosomal abnormalities were more than a century away from being understood or diagnosed. Even under the best conditions, the infant mortality rate was 10 percent in the early 1800s.

The elder Thomas built a small coffin and buried his son near the cabin. No grave marker remains. Nancy pulled herself together and doted on her remaining children—especially Abe. She encouraged his insatiable curiosity, his innate love of learning stories, names, and facts and reciting them again and again. Over her husband’s objections, she began to teach Abe how to read and write before his fifth birthday. “Father had no use for books,” he recalled years later, “short of burning them when the firewood got wet.” Though there is no record of her feelings, Nancy Lincoln must have sensed that her son was gifted. Certainly she was determined to see him go on to better things than she or her

husband could.

The Old Cumberland Trail ran directly through Knob Creek Farm. It was a highway of sorts, the main route between Louisville and Nashville, and characters of every stripe passed in both directions daily. Five-year-old Abe would sit on a fence rail for hours at a time, laughing at the molasses wagon driver who always made a show of cursing his mules, or waving at the post rider as he galloped by on horseback. Occasionally he saw slaves being taken to auction.

I recall seeing a horse cart pass, filled with Negroes. There were several. All women, and of varying age. They were… shackled at the wrist and chained together on the cart bed, without so much as a handful of loose hay to comfort the bumps of the road, or a blanket to relieve them from the winter air. The drivers, naturally, sat on the cushioned bench in front, each of them wrapped in wool. My eyes met those of the youngest Negro girl, who was close in age to myself. Perhaps five or six. I admit that I could not look at her more than a moment before turning away—such was the sorrow of her countenance.

As a Baptist, Thomas Lincoln had been raised to believe that slavery was a sin. It was one of the few lasting contributions he would make to his son's character.

Knob Creek became a place where weary travelers on the Old Cumberland Trail could spend the night. Sarah would make up a bed for each guest in one of the outbuildings (the farm consisted of a cabin, a storage shed, and a barn), and Nancy would serve a hot meal at sundown. The Lincolns never asked their overnight guests for payment, though most made contributions, either in money or, more often, in goods such as grain, sugar, and tobacco. After supper, the women would retire, and the men would pass the evening sipping whiskey and puffing pipes. Abe would lie awake in his bed in the loft above, listening to his father entertain their guests with a seemingly limitless reserve of stories, thrilling tales of the early settlers and the Revolutionary War, humorous anecdotes and allegories, and true (or partly true) stories from his own wandering days.

Father may have been wanting in some things, but here he was masterful. Night upon night, I marveled at his power to hold listeners in rapt attention. He could tell a story with such detail, such flourish, that afterwards a man would swear that it had been his own memory, and not a tale at all. I would… fight off sleep till well past midnight, trying to remember every word, and trying to fathom a way to tell the same story to my young friends in a manner they would understand.

Like his father, Abe had a natural gift for storytelling and would grow to master the art. His ability to communicate—to boil complex ideas down to simple, colorful parables—would be a powerful asset in later political life.

Travelers were expected to relay any news from the outside world. Most simply retold stories from the newspapers of Louisville or Nashville, or repeated gossip picked up along the road. “It was common to hear of the same drunk falling into the same ditch three times in a week, in three different voices.” Every so often, however, a traveler would arrive bearing stories of a different sort. Abe recalled trembling beneath his covers one night as a French immigrant described the madness of Paris in the 1780s.

The people had taken to calling it la ville des morts, the Frenchman said. The City of Death. Every night brought new screams, and every morning, new pale, wide-eyed bodies in the streets, or bloated victims fished from the sewers, which often ran red. They were the remains of men, women, children. They were innocent victims with no common bonds beyond their poverty, and there was nary a person in France who had any doubt as to the identity of their murderers. “It was les vampires!” he said. “We had seen them with our own eyes!” Vampires, he told us, had been the “quiet curse” of Paris for centuries. But now, with so much famine and disease… so many poor beggars packed tightly in the slums… they were growing ever bolder. Ever hungrier. “Yet Louis did nothing! He and his aristocrates pompeux did nothing while vampires feasted upon his starving subjects, until finally his subjects would tolerate no more.”

Naturally, the Frenchman’s story, like all vampire stories, was considered folly, a myth concocted to frighten children. Still, Abe found them endlessly fascinating. He spent hours dreaming up his own tales of “winged immortals,” their “white fangs stained with blood, waiting in the darkness for the next unfortunate soul to wander their way.” He thrilled in testing their effectiveness on his sister, who “frightened easier than a field mouse, but thought it was good fun nonetheless.”

Thomas, on the other hand, was quick to scold Abe if he caught him spinning vampire yarns. Such stories were “childish nonsense” and had no place in polite conversation.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

III

In 1816, another land dispute brought an end to the Lincolns' time at Knob Creek. Ownership was a murky concept on the frontier, with multiple deeds often issued for the same property, and records mysteriously appearing or disappearing (depending on the nature of the bribe). Rather than face a costly legal battle, Thomas uprooted his family for the second time in Abe's seven years, leading them west across the Ohio River and into Indiana. There, having apparently learned nothing from his previous land disputes, Thomas simply helped himself to a 160-acre plot of land in a heavily wooded settlement known as Little Pigeon Creek, near present-day Gentryville. The decision to leave Kentucky was both a practical and moral one. Practical, because there was plenty of cheap land to be had after the Indians were driven out following the War of 1812. Moral, because Thomas was an abolitionist, and Indiana was a free territory.

Compared to the farms at Sinking Springs and Knob Creek, the Lincolns' new homestead was truly untamed—surrounded by an "unbroken wilderness," where bears and bobcats roamed without boundaries or fear of man. Their first months were spent in a hastily constructed lean-to barely big enough for four people and open to the elements on one side. The biting cold of that first Indiana winter must have been unbearable.

Little Pigeon Creek was remote, but hardly lonely. There were eight or nine families less than a mile from the Lincolns' home, many of them fellow Kentuckians. "More than a dozen boys my age lived within a short walk. We… formed a militia, and waged a campaign of mischief that is still spoken of in southern Indiana." But the growing community was more than a repository for boisterous children. As was often the case on the frontier, families pooled their resources and talents to increase their chances of survival, planting and harvesting crops together, trading goods and labor, and lending a hand in times of illness or hardship. Considered the best carpenter in the area, Thomas rarely wanted for work. One of his first contributions was a tiny one-room schoolhouse, which Abe would attend infrequently in the coming years. During his first presidential campaign, he would write a brief autobiography, in which he admitted that the

sum of his schooling amounted to “less than a year altogether.” Even so, it was obvious to at least one of those early teachers, Azel Waters Dorsey, that Abraham Lincoln was “an exceptional child.”

Following Abe’s fateful turkey encounter, he announced that he would no longer hunt game. As punishment, Thomas put him to work splitting wood—thinking the physical toll would force him to reconsider. Though Abe could barely lift the blade higher than his waist, he spent hour after hour clumsily splitting and stacking logs.

It got to be that I could hardly tell where the ax stopped and my arm began. After a while, the handle would simply slip through my fingers, and my arms would hang at my sides like a pair of curtains. If Father saw me resting thus, he would cuss up a cyclone, take the ax from the ground, and split a dozen logs in a minute to shame me into working again. I kept at it, though, and with each passing day, my arms grew a little stronger.

FIG. 23A. - YOUNG ABE IN HIS JOURNAL BY FIRELIGHT, ACCOMPANIED BY SOME OF HIS EARLY VAMPIRE-HUNTING TOOLS.

Soon, Abe could split more logs in a minute than his father.

Two years had passed since those first months in the lean-to. The family now lived in a small, sturdy cabin with a stone fireplace, shingled roof, and raised wooden floor that stayed warm and dry in winter. As always, Thomas worked just enough to keep them clothed and fed. Nancy’s great-aunt and great-uncle Tom and Elizabeth Sparrow had come from Kentucky to live in one of the outbuildings and help out around the farm. Things were good. “I have since learned to distrust such stillness,” Abe wrote in 1852, “as it is always, always prelude to some great calamity.”

One September night in 1818, Abe awoke with a start. He sat straight up in his bed and shielded his face with his hands, as if someone had been standing over him, threatening to bring a club down on his head. No one did. Realizing the danger was imagined, he lowered his hands, caught his breath, and looked around. Everyone was asleep. Judging by the embers in the fireplace, it was two or three in the morning.

Abe ventured outside wearing nothing but his sleeping gown, despite the early arrival of autumn. He walked toward the silhouette of the outhouse, still half asleep, closed the door behind him, and sat. As his eyes adjusted, the moonlight coming in though the planks suddenly seemed bright enough to read by. With no book to pass the time, Abe ran his hands through the tiny

shafts of light, examining the patterns they made on his fingers.

Someone was talking outside.

Abe held his breath as the footfalls of two men grew closer, then stopped. They're in front of the cabin. One spoke in an angry whisper. Though he couldn't make out the words, Abe knew the voice didn't belong to anyone in Little Pigeon Creek. "The accent was English, and the pitch uncommonly high." The stranger ranted for a moment, then paused, waiting for an answer. It came. This time, the voice was very familiar. It belonged to Thomas Lincoln.

I pressed my eye to one of the spaces between the planks. It was indeed Father, and he was with someone I had never seen before. This stranger was a squat figure of a man, clad in finer attire than I had ever seen. He was missing his right arm below the elbow—the sleeve neatly pinned to his shoulder. Father, though easily the larger of the two, seemed to cower before this companion.

Abe struggled to make out their conversation, but they were too far away. He watched, trying his best to read their gestures, their lips, until…

Father, suddenly mindful of waking us, urged his companion away from the cabin. I held my breath as they drew closer, certain that I would be revealed by the hammering of my heart. They stopped not four yards from where I sat. It was in this manner that I overheard the last of the argument. "I cannot," said Father. The stranger stood in silence and disappointment.

Finally he gave his reply. "Then I'll take it in other ways."

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

IV

Tom and Elizabeth Sparrow were dying. For three days and nights, Nancy nursed her great-aunt and great-uncle through scorching fevers, delusions, and cramps so severe they made the six-foot Tom weep like a child. Abe and Sarah stuck close to their mother, helping her keep the compresses wet and the bedding clean, and praying with her for a miraculous recovery that they all knew, deep down, wouldn't come. The old folks had seen this before. They called it "the milk sick," a slow poisoning brought on by drinking tainted milk. It was untreatable and fatal. Abe had never watched someone die before, and he hoped that God would forgive him for being slightly curious to see it happen.

He hadn't dared confront his father about what he'd seen and heard a week earlier. Thomas had been especially distant (and largely absent) since that night, and seemed to want no part of the vigil taking place at Tom and Elizabeth's bedside.

They died in quick succession—he first, she a few hours later. Abe was secretly disappointed. He'd half expected a last desperate gasp for breath, or a touching soliloquy, as in the books he was now reading to himself at night. Instead, Tom and Elizabeth simply fell into a coma, lay still for several hours, and died. Thomas Lincoln, without so much as a word of condolence to his wife, set about fashioning a pair of coffins from planks and wooden pegs the next morning. The Sparrows were in the ground by supper.

Father had never been particularly fond of Aunt and Uncle, and they were hardly the first relations he had buried. Yet I had never known him to be so quiet. He seemed lost in thought. Uneasy.

Four days later, Nancy Lincoln began to feel ill. At first, she insisted it was nothing more than a headache, no doubt brought on by the stress of Tom and Elizabeth's death. Nevertheless, Thomas sent for the nearest doctor, who lived thirty miles away. By the time he arrived, just before sunrise the next morning, Nancy was delusional with fever.

My sister and I knelt at her side, trembling from fear and want of sleep. Father sat on a nearby chair as the doctor examined her. I knew that she was dying. I knew that God was

punishing me. Punishing me for my curiosity over Aunt and Uncle's death. Punishing me for killing a creature that had shown me no malice. I alone was responsible. When the doctor was finished, he asked for a word with Father outside. When they returned, Father could not help his tears. None of us could.

That night, Abe sat alone by his mother's side. Sarah had fallen asleep next to the fire, and Thomas had nodded off in his chair for the moment. Nancy had finally fallen into a coma. She'd been screaming for hours—first from the delusions, and then from the pain. At one point, Thomas and the doctor had restrained her while she shrieked about "looking the devil in the eyes."

Abe took the compress off her forehead and dipped it in the water bowl by his feet. He'd have to light another candle soon. The one by her bedside was beginning to flicker. As he lifted the compress and wrung it out, a hand seized his wrist.

"My baby boy," whispered Nancy.

The transformation was total. Her face was calm, her voice gentle and even. There was something of a light in her eyes again. My heart leapt. This could only be the miracle I had so earnestly prayed for. She looked at me and smiled. "My baby boy," she whispered again. "Live." Tears began to run down my cheeks. I wondered if this was just some cruel dream. "Mama?" I asked. "Live," she repeated. I wept. God had forgiven me. God had given her back to me. She smiled again. I felt her hand slip from my wrist, and I watched her eyes close. "Mama?" Once more, this time barely above a whisper, she repeated, "Live." She never opened her eyes again.

Nancy Hanks Lincoln died on October 5th, 1818, age thirty-four. Thomas buried her on a hillside behind the cabin.

Abe was alone in the world.

His mother had been his soul mate. She had shown him love and encouragement since the day he was born. She had read to him all those nights, always holding the book in her left hand and gently twirling a finger through his dark hair with the right as he fell asleep on her lap. Hers had been the first face to greet him when he entered the world. He hadn't cried. He had simply looked at her and smiled. She was love, and light. And she was gone. Abe wept for her.

No sooner was she buried than Abe resolved to run away. The thought of staying in Little Pigeon Creek with his eleven-year-old sister and grief-stricken father was more than he could bear. Before his mother was thirty-six hours dead, Abe Lincoln, nine years old, trudged through the Indiana wilderness, carrying all of his meager possessions in a wool blanket. His plan was

brilliantly simple. He would walk as far as the Ohio River. There, he would beg his way onto a flatboat and float down to the lower Mississippi, then into New Orleans, where he'd be able to stow away on any number of ships. Perhaps he'd find his way to New York or Boston. Perhaps he'd sail to Europe, to see the immortal cathedrals and castles he'd often imagined.

FIG. 12-B. - YOUNG ABE STANDS OVER HIS MOTHERS'S GRAVE IN AN EARLY 1900'S ENGRAVING TITLED 'A PLEDGE OF VENGEANCE'.

If there was a flaw in his plan, it was his time of departure. Abe chose to leave home in the afternoon, and by the time he'd put four miles behind him, the short winter day was fading to darkness. Surrounded by untamed wilderness, with nothing more than a wool blanket and a handful of food to his name, Abe stopped, sat against a tree, and sobbed. He was alone in the dark, and he was homesick for a place that no longer existed. He longed for his mother. He longed to feel his sister's hair against his face as he wept on her shoulder. To his surprise, he even found himself longing for his father's embrace.

There was a faint cry in the night—a long, animal cry that echoed all around me. I thought at once of the bears that our neighbor Reuben Grigsby had spotted near the creek not two days before, and felt like a rube for leaving home without so much as a knife. There was another cry, and another. They seemed to move all around me, and the more I heard, the more obvious it became that no bear, or panther, or animal was making them. They had a different sound. A human sound. All at once I realized what I was hearing. Without bothering to take my belongings, I jumped up and ran toward home as fast as my feet would carry me.

They were screams.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

TWO

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

Two Stories

And having thus chosen our course, without guile, and with pure purpose, let us renew our trust in God, and go forward without fear, and with manly hearts.

—Abraham Lincoln, in an address to Congress
July 4th, 1861

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

I

If Thomas Lincoln ever tried to comfort his children in the wake of their mother's death—if he ever asked them how they felt, or shared his own grief—there is no record of it. He seems to have spent the months after her burial in near-total silence. Waking before dawn. Boiling his coffee. Picking at his breakfast. Working till nightfall, and (more often than not) drinking himself into a stupor. A short grace at supper was often the only time Abe and Sarah heard his voice.

Be present at our table, Lord—
Be here and everywhere adored.
Thy mercies bless and grant that we—
May strengthened for thy service be.

But for all his faults, Thomas Lincoln had what the old-timers called "horse sense." He knew that his situation was untenable. He knew that he couldn't keep his family going alone.

In the winter of 1819, just over a year after Nancy's death, Thomas abruptly announced that he would be leaving for "two weeks or three"—and that when he returned, the children would have a new mother.

This took us quite by surprise, for we had scarcely heard him utter a word for the better of a year, and were unaware that he had any such designs. Whether he had any particular woman in mind, he did not say. I wondered if he meant to take an advertisement in the Gazette, or simply wander the streets of Louisville proposing to any unaccompanied lady who walked his way. Neither, I admit, would have surprised me much.

Unbeknownst to Abe and Sarah, Thomas did have someone particular in mind, a recently widowed acquaintance in Elizabethtown (the very place he'd first laid eyes on his Nancy some thirteen years before). He meant to show up on her doorstep unannounced, propose marriage, and bring her back to Little Pigeon Creek. That was it. That was the extent of his plan.

For Thomas, the trip marked an end to his silent grieving. For nine-year-old Abe and eleven-year-old Sarah, it marked the first time they'd ever been left alone.

At night we left a candle burning in the center of the room, hid beneath our covers, and barricaded the door with father's

bed. I know not what we meant to protect ourselves from, only that we felt better for having done it. We remained this way well into the night, listening to the noises that came from all around us. Animal noises. Far-off voices carried on the wind. The cracking of twigs as something walked around the cabin. We shivered in our beds until the candle finally died, then fought in whispers over who would leave the safety of their covers and light the next. When father returned, we were each given a good thrashing for having burned through so many candles in such a short time.

Thomas was true to his word. When he returned, he was accompanied by a wagon. In it were all the earthly possessions (or at least, the ones that would fit) of the newly minted Sarah Bush Lincoln and her three children: Elizabeth, thirteen; Matilda, ten; and John, nine. For Abe and his sister, the sight of a wagon brimming with furniture, clocks, and tableware was akin to beholding "the treasures of the maharaja." For the new Mrs. Lincoln, the sight of these barefoot, dirt-covered frontier children was equally shocking. They were stripped down and scrubbed thoroughly that very night.

There were no two ways about it—Sarah Bush Lincoln was a plain woman. She had sunken eyes and a narrow face, which conspired to make her look perpetually starved. She had a high forehead made larger by the fact that her wiry brown hair was forever pulled back in a tight bun. She was skinny, knock-kneed, and missing two of her bottom teeth. But a widower with few prospects and nary a dollar to his name couldn't be picky. Nor could a woman with three children and debts to pay. Theirs was a union born of good old-fashioned horse sense.

Abe had been quite prepared to hate his stepmother. From the moment Thomas announced his intentions to marry, he'd busied his head with schemes to undermine her. Imagined faults to hold against her.

It was inconvenient, therefore, that she was kind, encouraging, and endlessly sensitive. Sensitive in particular to the fact that my sister and I would always hold a tender place in our hearts for our sweet mother.

Like Nancy before her, the new Mrs. Lincoln recognized Abe's passion for books and resolved to nurture it. Among the possessions she'd carted in from Kentucky was a Webster's Speller, which proved a gold mine to the unschooled boy. Sarah (who, like her new husband, was illiterate) often asked Abe to read from her Bible after supper. He delighted in regaling his new family with passages from Corinthians and Kings; with the

wisdom of Solomon and the folly of Nabal. His faith had grown since his mother's passing. He liked to imagine her looking down from heaven, running her angel fingers through his soft brown hair as he read. Protecting him from harm. Comforting him in times of need.

Abe also took a liking to his new stepsiblings, particularly John, whom he dubbed "the General" for his love of playing at war.

Where I was reluctant to stand, John was reluctant to stand still, always concocting this imagined battle or that and rounding up the required number of boys to fight it. Always urging me to leave my books and join his fun. I would refuse, and he would harass, promising to make me a captain or colonel. Promising to do my chores if I joined in. Badgering me until I had no choice but to leave the comfort of my reading tree and run wild. At the time, I considered him something of a simpleton. I now realize how wise he was. For a boy needs more than books to be a boy.

On his eleventh birthday, Sarah presented Abe with a small, leather-bound journal (against Thomas's wishes). She'd bought it with money earned by cleaning and mending clothes for Mr. Gregson, an elderly neighbor whose wife had passed away years before. Books were hard enough to come by on the frontier, but journals were truly a luxury—particularly for little boys in poor families. One can only imagine Abe's joy at receiving such a gift. He wasted no time making his first entry, dutifully recorded in his unpolished hand on the very day he received it.

This is the Journal of Abraham Lincoln.

9 February 1820—I have been given this book as a gift for my elevnth [sic] birthday by my father and stepmother, who is named Mrs. Sarah Bush Lincoln. I will endevor [sic] to use it daily for the purpose of improving my letters.

—Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

II

One early spring night, not long after those words were carefully composed, Thomas called his son outside to sit by the fire. He was drunk. Abe knew this, even before being summoned to sit on a stump and warm himself. His father only made a fire outside when he felt like getting particularly plastered.

"I ever tell you about your granddaddy?"

It was one of his favorite stories to tell when he was drunk: the story of witnessing his father's brutal murder as a boy, an event that left him deeply scarred. Unfortunately the comforts of Sigmund Freud's couch were still decades away. In its absence, Thomas did what any self-respecting, emotionally crippled frontiersman did to deal with his troubles: he got blind, stinking drunk and hung them out to dry. If there was any consolation for Abe, it was this: his father was a gifted storyteller, with a knack for making every detail come alive. He would mimic accents, mime actions. Change the tenor of his voice and the rhythm of his delivery. He was a natural performer.

Unfortunately, Abe had seen this particular performance many, many times. He could recite the story word for word: how his grandfather (also named Abraham) had been plowing a field near his Kentucky home. How eight-year-old Thomas and his brothers had watched him toil in the heat of that May afternoon, turning over the soil. How they'd been startled by the yells of a Shawnee war party as it sprang out of hiding and attacked. How little Thomas took cover behind a tree and watched them beat his father's brains in with a stone hammer. Cut his throat with a tomahawk. He could describe it all—even his grandmother's face as young Thomas relayed the news after running home.

But that wasn't the version Thomas told him now.

The story began as it always had, in the heat wave of May 1786. Thomas was eight years old. He and two of his older brothers, Josiah and Mordecai, had accompanied their father to a four-acre clearing in the woods, not far from the farmhouse they'd helped him build some years before. Thomas watched his father guide the small plow as it scraped along behind Ben, an aging draft horse that had been with the family since before the war. The blistering sun had finally dipped below the horizon,

leaving the Ohio River Valley in soft, blue-leaning light, but it was still "hotter than a woodstove in hell," and humid to boot. Abraham Sr. worked without his shirt, letting the air cool his long, sinewy torso. Young Thomas rode on Ben's back, working the reins while his brothers followed behind, broadcasting seed. Waiting for the welcome clang of the supper bell.

So far Abe knew every word. Next would come the part where they'd been startled by the war cries of the Shawnee. The part where the old draft horse reared up and threw Thomas to the ground. Where he ran into the woods and watched them gore his father to death. But the Shawnee never came. Not this time. This was a new story. One that Abe paraphrased in a letter to Joshua Speed more than twenty years later.

"The truth," father told me in a half whisper, "is that your granddaddy wasn't killed by any man."

The shirtless Abraham had been working the outer edge of his clearing, right up against the tree line, when there was "a great rustling and cracking of branches" from the nearby woods, no more than twenty yards from where he and his boys worked.

"Daddy told me to pull up on the reins while he gave a listen. It was probably nothing but a few deer making their way, but we'd seen our share of black bears, too."

They'd also heard the stories. Reports of Shawnee war parties preying on unsuspecting settlers—killing white women and children without shame. Burning homes. Scalping men alive. This was still contested land. Indians were everywhere. There was no such thing as an excess of caution.

"The rustling came from a different part of the woods now. Whatever it was, it wasn't any deer, and it wasn't alone. Daddy cussed himself for leaving his flintlock at home and started unhitching Ben. He wasn't about to let the devils have his horse. He sent my brothers off—Mordecai to fetch his gun, Josiah to get help from Hughes's Station." *

The rustling changed now. The treetops began to bend, like something was jumping across them, one to the other.

"Daddy hurried with the straps. 'Shawnee,' he whispered. My heart just about thumped a hole in my chest at the sound of it. I followed those treetops with my eyes, waiting for a pack of wild savages to run out of the woods, whooping and hollering and waving their hatchets. I could see their red faces staring at me. I could feel my hair being pulled tight… my scalp being clipped off."

Abraham was still struggling with the hitch when Thomas saw something white leap from a treetop "some fifty feet up."

Something the size and shape of a man.

"It was a ghost. The way it flew above the earth. The way its white body rippled as it moved through the air. A Shawnee ghost, come to take our souls for trespassing."

Thomas watched it soar toward them, too frightened to yell. Too frightened to warn his father that it was coming. Right above him. Right now.

"I saw a glint of white and heard a shriek that would've woke the dead a mile off. Old Ben spooked, threw me in the dirt, and took off running wild, the plow hanging on by one strap, bouncing around behind him. I looked up where Daddy'd been standing. He was gone."

Thomas struggled to his feet with a head full of stars and (though he wouldn't realize it for hours) a broken wrist. The ghost stood fifteen or twenty feet away with its back to him. Standing over his father, patient and calm. Glaring at him like a God. Reveling in his helplessness.

"He wasn't no ghost. No Shawnee, either. Even from the back, I could tell this stranger wasn't much more than a boy—no bigger than my brothers. His shirt looked like it'd been made for somebody twice his size. White as ivory. Half tucked into his striped gray trousers. His skin was damn near the same shade, and the back of his neck was crisscrossed with little blue lines. There he stood, with not a twitch or breath to set him apart from a statue."

Abraham Sr. was barely forty-two years old. Good genes had made him tall and broad shouldered. Honest work had made him lean and muscular. He'd never seen the losing end of a fight, and he sure as hell wouldn't see it now. He got to his feet ("slow, like his ribs were broke"), squared his body, and clenched his fists. He was hurt, but that could wait. First, he was going to knock this little son of a—

"Daddy's jaw went slack when he got a look at the boy's face. Whatever he saw scared the hell out of him."

"What in the name of Chr—?"

The boy swung at Abraham's head. It missed me. Abraham took a step back and lifted his fists, but stopped short of throwing a punch. It missed. He felt a stinging on the left side of his face. Didn't it? A tingling under his eye. He lifted the tip of his index finger to his face… the slightest touch. Blood began to run down in sheets, pouring out of the razor-thin slice that ran from his ear to his mouth.

It didn't miss.

These are the last seconds of my life.

Abraham felt his head snap backward. Felt his eye socket shatter. Light everywhere. He felt the blood running from his nostrils. Another blow. Another. His son screaming somewhere. Why doesn't he run? His jaw broken. His teeth knocked loose. The fists and the screaming growing farther away. To sleep now… never to wake.

It held Abraham's body by the hair, striking and striking until his forehead finally "caved in like an eggshell."

"The stranger wrapped his hands around Daddy's neck and lifted him in the air. I cried out again—sure he meant to strangle the last of him away. Instead he pushed those long thumbnails, those knives, through Daddy's Adam's apple and—pop—tore his neck open from the middle. He held his mouth underneath the hole, guzzling like a drunk with a whiskey bottle. Swallowing mouthfuls of blood. When it didn't come quick enough, he wrapped an arm around Daddy's chest and hugged him tight. Squeezed his heart till the last ounce was gone—then dropped him in the dirt and turned around. Looked dead at me. Now I understood. Now I knew why Daddy'd been so scared. It had eyes black as coal. Teeth as long and sharp as a wolf's. The white face of a demon, God strike me down if I lie. My heart thumped away. My breath abandoned me. It stood there with its face covered in Daddy's blood and it… I swear to you it clutched its hands to its chest and… sang to me."

It had the earnest, pitch-perfect voice of a young man. An unmistakable English accent.

When griping grief the heart doth wound,
And doleful dumps the mind oppress—
Then music, with her silver sound,
With speedy help doth lend redress. *

That such a sound could come from something so hideous—that its white face could wear such a warm smile—it was all a cruel joke. Its song concluded, the demon gave a long, low bow and ran into the woods. "Ran off till I couldn't see a trace of white between the trees no more." Eight-year-old Thomas knelt over his father's crooked, empty corpse. Every inch of him shook.

"I knew I had to lie. I knew I could never tell a soul what I'd seen, lest they think me a fool, or a liar or worse. What had I seen, anyway? I might have dreamed it for all I knew. When Mordecai came running with the flintlock—when he demanded to know what happened—I broke down crying and told him the only thing I could. The only thing he'd have believed—that it was a Shawnee war party that killed our daddy. I couldn't tell him the truth. I couldn't tell him it was a vampire."

Abe couldn't speak. He sat across from his drunken father, letting the occasional cracks of burning wood fill the void.

I had listened to hundreds of his stories, some collected from the lives of others, some recounted from his own. But I had never known him to invent one, even in his present state. Frankly I did not think his mind capable. Nor could I think of a sensible reason to lie about such a thing. That left only one unsettling possibility.

"You think I've gone round the bend," said Thomas.

It was precisely what I thought, but I gave no answer. I had learned to keep my mouth closed on such occasions, rather than risk the angry misinterpretation of some innocent remark. I resolved to sit in silence until he sent me away or fell asleep.

"Hell, you've got every reason to."

He took a swallow of last week's work * and looked at me with a softness I had never seen in him before. Putting everything else aside for the moment and seeing the two of us, not as we were, but as we might have been in some better life. Father and son. That his eyes presently filled with tears both astonished and frightened me. I felt him pleading with me to believe. Yet I could not believe something so foolish. He was a drunk telling a story. That was all.

"I'm telling you because you ought to know. Because you… deserve the truth. I'm telling you that I've seen two vampires in my life. The first was in that field. The second…"

Thomas looked away, fighting back tears again.

"The second was named Jack Barts… and I saw him just before your mama died…."

Father had spent the summer of 1817 committing the sin of envy. He'd grown tired of watching his neighbors reap kingly profits by planting wheat and corn on their land. He'd grown tired of breaking his back to build the barns they used to get rich, while sharing in none of the spoils. He felt, for the first time in his life, something like ambition. What he lacked was capital.

Jack Barts was a squat, one-armed man with a taste for expensive clothes and a thriving shipping business in Louisville. He was also one of the few Kentuckians in the business of giving private loans. Thomas had done some work for him as a young man, loading and unloading flatboats on the Ohio River for twenty cents a day. Barts had always treated him kindly and paid him promptly, and when they'd parted company, it had been with a handshake and an open invitation to return. More than twenty years later, in the spring of 1818, Thomas Lincoln took him up on that offer. With his hat in his hands and his head hung low, Thomas sat in Jack Barts's office and asked for a loan of $75—

precisely the amount he needed to buy a plow, a draft horse, seeds, and "everything else one needed to grow wheat, short of sunshine and rain."

Barts, who looked "hale and hearty as ever in his one-sleeved violet coat," agreed at once. His conditions were simple: Thomas would return with $90 (the principal plus 20 percent interest) no later than September 1st. Any profits earned above that were his to keep. Twenty percent was more than twice what any respectable bank would've charged. But seeing as Thomas didn't technically own anything (having merely helped himself to his plot at Little Pigeon Creek), he had no collateral—and nowhere else to turn.

Father accepted the terms and went to work felling trees, pulling stumps, plowing sod, and broadcasting seeds. It was grueling labor. In all, he planted seven acres of wheat by hand. If he yielded thirty bushels an acre (a reasonable estimate), he would have enough to pay Barts back, plus a little to get us through winter. Next year he would plant more. The year after that, he would hire a hand to share the work. In five years' time, we would own the largest farm in the county. In ten years, the state. His last seed sown, father rested and waited for his future to spring from the earth.

But the summer of 1818 proved the hottest and driest in anyone's memory. When July arrived, there was nary a healthy stalk to be harvested anywhere in Indiana.

Thomas was ruined.

He had no choice but to sell the plow and horse for what little money he could. With no crops to harvest, they weren't worth much. Too ashamed to face Barts in person, Thomas sent him $28, along with a letter dated September 1st (which he'd dictated to Nancy) promising to send the rest as soon as he could. It was the best he could do. It wasn't good enough for Jack Barts.

Two weeks later, Thomas Lincoln found himself pleading in whispers, each one visible in the biting night air. He'd been roused from sleep only minutes before. Roused by something brushing against his cheek. The sleeve of a blue silk coat. A handful of bank-notes, $28 in all. The shape of Jack Barts standing over his bed.

Barts hadn't come all this way to argue, merely to warn. He liked father. He had always liked him. Therefore, he would give him three more days to find the rest of his money. It was business, you see. If word got around that Jack Barts granted special favors to delinquent borrowers, then others might think twice about paying him on time. And where would that leave

him? In the poorhouse? No, no. There was nothing remotely personal about it. It was merely a matter of solvency.

They stood by the outhouse, lest their whispers wake anyone in the cabin. Barts asked him one more time: “Can you have my money in three days?” Thomas hung his head again. “I cannot.” Barts smiled and looked away. “Then…”

He turned back. His face was gone—a demon’s in its place. A window into hell. Black eyes and white skin and teeth as long and sharp as a wolf’s God strike me down if I lie.

“… I’ll take it in other ways.”

Abe stared at his father through the fire.

Dread. Dread filled my stomach. My arms and legs. I was faint. Sick. I wished to hear no more of this. Not tonight. Not ever. But father could not stop. Not when he was so close to the end. The one that I had already guessed, but dared not believe.

“It was a vampire that took my daddy from me…”

“Stop…”

“Who took the Sparr—”

“Enough!”

“And it was a vampire who took your—”

“Go to hell!”

Thomas wept.

The very sight of him awakened some heretofore unknown hatred. Hatred of my father. Of all things. He revolted me. I ran into the night for fear of what I might say; what I might do if I were in his presence a moment longer. My anger kept me away for three days and nights. I slept in the barns and outbuildings of neighbors. Stole eggs and ears of corn. Walked until my legs shook from exhaustion. Wept at the thought of my mother. They had taken her from me. Father and Jack Barts. I hated myself for being too small to protect her. I hated my father for telling me such impossible, unspeakable things. And yet I knew they were the truth. I cannot explain how I knew with such certainty, but I did. The way my father had hushed us when we spun vampire yarns. The screams that had carried on the wind at night. My mother’s fevered whispers about “looking the devil in the eyes.” Father was a drunk. An indolent, loveless drunk. But he was no liar. During those three days of anger and grief, I gave into madness and admitted something to myself: I believed in vampires. I believed in them, and I hated them to the last.

When he finally came home (to a frightened stepmother and silent father), Abe didn’t say a word. He made straight for his journal and wrote down a single sentence. One that would radically alter the course of his life, and bring a fledgling nation

to the brink of collapse.

I hereby resolve to kill every vampire in America.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

III

Sarah had hoped Abe would read to them after supper. It was getting late, but there was a good fire going, and more than enough time for a few pages of Jonah's adventures or Joseph's coat of many colors. She loved the way Abe read them. Such life. Such expression and clarity. He had a wisdom well beyond his years. Manners and sweetness seldom found in a child. He was, as she would tell William Herndon after her stepson's assassination, "the best boy I ever saw or ever hope to see."

But her Bible was nowhere to be found. Had she lent it to a neighbor and forgotten? Had she left it at Mr. Gregson's? She looked everywhere. She looked in vain. Sarah would never see her Bible again.

Abe had burned it.

It was the rash act of an angry child, one that he would live to regret (though never enough, it seems, to tell his stepmother the truth). Years later he would attempt to explain himself:

How could I worship a God who would permit [vampires] to exist? A God that had allowed my mother to fall prey to their evil? * Either He was powerless to stop it, or He was complicit in it. In either case, He was undeserving of my praise. In either case, He was my enemy. Such is the mind of an angry eleven-year-old boy. One that sees the world as a choice between two disparate certainties. One that believes a thing "must" be this way or that. I am ashamed that it happened, yes. But I would not compound that shame by pretending that it did not.

With his faith in ruins, eleven-year-old Abe took his resolution a step further in this undated manifesto (c. August 1820):

Henceforth my life shall be one of rigerous [sic] study and devotion. I shall become learned in all things. I shall become a greater warrior then [sic] Alexander. My life shall have but one purpose. That purpose is to kill * as many vampires as I can. This journal shall be where I write about killing vampires. No one other then [sic] me shall read it.

His interest in books, which to date had merely been ravenous, became obsessive. He walked more than an hour to the home of Aaron Stibel, a shoemaker who boasted a personal

library of some 150 volumes, twice a week to return an armful of books and borrow another armful. He accompanied his stepmother to Elizabethtown whenever she visited a relative, sequestering himself in the Village Street home of Samuel Haycraft Sr., one of the town's founders, and the proud owner of nearly five hundred books. Abe read about the occult; found mentions of vampires in European folklore. He compiled a list of their rumored weaknesses, markings, and habits. It became common for stepmother Sarah to find him asleep at the table in the morning, his head resting on an open page.

When he wasn't improving his mind, Abe was hard at work improving his body. He doubled his daily wood chopping. He built long, winding stone walls. He practiced throwing his ax into a tree. First from ten yards. Then twenty. When stepbrother John invited him to play at war, he jumped at the chance, and fought with a new intensity that left more than one neighbor boy's lip bloodied. Based on the information he'd gathered in books, Abe whittled a dozen stakes and made a quiver to carry them in. He fashioned a small crucifix (although he had declared God his "enemy," it appears that Abe wasn't opposed to his help). He took to carrying small pouches of garlic and mustard seed. He sharpened his ax until the blade "blinded all who looked upon it." At night, he dreamed of death. Of hunting down his enemies and driving stakes through their hearts. Of taking their heads. Of glorious battle. Years later, as the clouds of Civil War loomed on the horizon, Abe looked back at his youthful bloodlust.

There are but two types of men who desire war: those who haven't the slightest intention of fighting it themselves, and those who haven't the slightest idea what it is. Of my youth I can decidedly say that the latter was true. I ached for this "war" with vampires, knowing nothing of its consequences. Knowing nothing of holding a dying friend in my arms or burying a child. Any man who has seen the face of death knows better than to seek him out a second time.

But in the summer of 1821, these lessons were still years off. Abe wanted his war with vampires, and after months of vigorous study and exercise, he was ready to launch the opening salvo.

He wrote a letter.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

IV

Abe was uncommonly tall for a boy of twelve. He already stood shoulder to shoulder with his father, who was himself considered tall at five-foot nine. Like his ill-fated grandfather, good genes and years of toil had made him exceptionally strong.

It was a Monday, "the kind of summer day one finds only in Kentucky—shining and verdant; the breeze carrying warmth and dandelion seeds." Abe and Thomas sat atop one of their smaller outbuildings, making repairs to its winter-beaten roof. They worked in silence. Though Abe's hatred had cooled, he still found it difficult to be in his father's presence. A journal entry dated December 2nd, 1843 (not long after the birth of Abe's own son, Robert), sheds some light on the nature of his contempt.

Age has made me temperate in many things, but on this point I remain steadfast. His weakness! His ineptness! He failed to protect his family. Thought only of his own needs, and left others to their cost. Had he simply gathered us and fled to some far-off territory. Had he merely asked our neighbors for some small advance against future work. But he did nothing. Nothing but sit idly. Silently. Secretly hoping that somehow, by some miracle, his troubles would simply disappear. No, it needs no further elaboration than this: had he been any other man, she would be with me still. This I cannot forgive.

Thomas, to his credit, seemed to understand and accept his condemnation. He hadn't mentioned the word "vampire" since that night. Nor had he pressed Abe to talk.

Sarah had taken the girls to help her clean Mr. Gregson's house that Monday afternoon, and John was off fighting some imaginary war. The two Lincolns were at work on the roof when a horse approached carrying a child on its back. A plump child in a green coat. Either that or a very short man. A short man with dark glasses and… one arm.

It was Jack Barts.

Thomas put his hammer down, his heart just about thumping a hole in his chest at the thought of what Barts could want now. By the time he climbed down and began walking to meet their unexpected guest, Abe was already halfway to the cabin. Barts handed Thomas his reins and dismounted with some difficulty,

hanging on to the saddle horn with one arm while his stout legs struggled to find the ground. Having done so, he found the fan in his coat pocket and put it to use, cooling his face. Thomas couldn't help but notice that there wasn't a bead of sweat on him.

"Simply dreadful… dreadfully, miserably hot."

"Mr. Barts, I—"

"I must admit, your letter surprised me, Mr. Lincoln. A happy surprise, to be certain. But a surprise nonetheless."

"My letter, Mr. Ba—?"

"Had you written it earlier, perhaps the unpleasantness which transpired between us might have been avoided. Terrible… terrible thing…"

Thomas was too confounded to notice Abe walking toward them with a long wooden object in his arms.

"You'll forgive my haste," said Barts, "but I should like to be off at once. I have business in Louisville which must be attended to this evening."

Thomas couldn't think of a thing to say. Not a damned thing.

"Well? Do you have it, Mr. Lincoln?"

Abe joined them, cradling a long, hand-carved chest with a hinged lid. A tiny coffin for a slender corpse. He stood beside his father, facing Barts. Towering over him. Leering at him.

"Strange," said Abe, breaking the silence. "I hadn't expected you during the day."

Now it was Barts who found his brain tied in knots.

"Who is this child?"

"My son," said Thomas, petrified.

"It's here," said Abe, raising the chest. "All of it. All one hundred dollars, just like the letter said."

Thomas was sure he'd misheard. Sure this was a dream. Barts looked at Abe, suspicious. Bewildered. A smile spread over his face.

"My God!" said Barts. "For a moment I thought us all mad!"

Barts began to laugh. Abe opened the lid—just enough to slip his hand inside.

"Good boy," said Barts, laughing heartily now. "Let us have it then."

He reached his hand up and ran his thick fingers through my hair. I could think of nothing but the way my mother had done the same when she read to me. I could think of nothing but her sweet face. I glared down at this man. This creature. I joined him in laughter as my father stood helpless—a fire spreading through my chest. I felt the wooden stake in my fingers. I could do anything. I was a god.

These are the last seconds of your life.

I have no memory of driving it in—I only remember that I did. His laughter ceased and he took an awkward step. His eyes turned black in the space of a single blink, as if the inkwells in his pupils had suddenly shattered—the spill contained behind glass. His fangs descended, and I could presently make out a faint blue web beneath his skin. It was true. Until that moment there had been room for doubt. But now I saw it with my own eyes. Now I knew.

Vampires were real.

His arm rose, and his stout little hand instinctively grabbed the stake. There was no fear in his face yet. Merely a puzzlement, as if he was attempting to sort out just how such an object could be attached to his body. He presently lost his footing and collapsed into a seated position, where he remained for a moment before falling the rest of the way onto his back. His hand lost its grip on the stake, and the arm fell to his side.

I walked around him, wondering when he would strike. Wondering when he would laugh at the futility of what I had done and cut me down. As I did, his eyes followed me. They were the only things that moved now. There was fear in them. He was dying… and he was afraid. What little color he had left him now—and rich, dark blood began to run from his nostrils; out the sides of his mouth. A trickle at first… then a flood—running over his cheeks and pooling over his eyes. More blood than I ever thought possible. I could see his soul (if indeed he had such a thing) departing. Bidding an unexpected, frightening farewell to such a long, long life—one undoubtedly filled with happiness, and agony, and struggle, and success. Filled with moments too beautiful to share. Too painful to recall. It was all ending now, and he was so afraid. Afraid of what nothingness awaited him. Or worse, what punishment.

And then he was gone. I expected my eyes to fill with tears. To feel remorse at the sight of what I had done. I admit that I felt nothing. I only wished he had suffered more.

Thomas stood aghast. “Look what you’ve done,” he said after a sickened silence. “You’ve killed us.”

“On the contrary… I’ve killed him.”

“More will come.”

Abe had already begun to walk away.

“Then I shall need more stakes.”

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

THREE

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

Henry

It is the eternal struggle between these two principles—right and wrong—throughout the world. They are the two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time; and will ever continue to struggle.

—Abraham Lincoln, debating Stephen A. Douglas
October 15th, 1858

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

I

Southeastern Indiana was in the grip of fear during the summer of 1825. Three children had gone missing over a six-week period beginning in early April. The first, a seven-year-old boy named Samuel Greene, disappeared while playing in the woods near his family's farm in Madison, a thriving town on the banks over the Ohio River. Search parties were sent out. Ponds dredged. But no trace of the boy was found. Less than two weeks later, before the people of Madison had abandoned all hope of finding him alive, six-year-old Gertrude Wilcox vanished from her bed in the middle of the night. Now alarm turned to panic. Parents refused to let their children outdoors. Neighbors leveled accusations at neighbors, all while three weeks passed without incident. Then, on May 20th, the third child was taken—not from Madison, but from the town of Jeffersonville twenty miles downriver. This time the body was found in a matter of days—along with two others. A hunter had made the gruesome discovery, following his dogs to a shallow wooded ditch where the three twisted corpses lay, hastily covered with brush. Their bodies were unnaturally decomposed—almost completely devoid of color. Each of their faces locked in an open-eyed mask of fear.

Abe Lincoln was sixteen years old that summer, and his resolution to "kill every vampire in America" was off to an inauspicious start. His father's fears had proved needless. No vampires ever came to avenge Jack Barts. In fact, in the four years since he'd staked Barts, Abe hadn't so much as seen another vampire, though not for lack of trying. He'd spent countless nights chasing distant screams on the wind and keeping watch over freshly dug graves just in case, as folklore suggested, a vampire came to feast on the corpse. But with nothing more than old books and old myths to guide him, and a father unwilling to help, Abe spent those four years in a constant state of frustration. There was little to do but keep up with his training. He'd reached his full height of six feet four inches, every square centimeter of him lean muscle. He could outwrestle and outrun most men twice his age. He could bury the head of an ax in a tree from over thirty yards. He could pull a plow every bit as fast as a draft horse, and lift a 250-pound log clean over his head.

What he couldn't do was sew. After spending weeks trying to fashion himself a long "hunting coat" only to see it fall to pieces after one or two wearings, he'd broken down and paid a seamstress to do the job (he hadn't asked his stepmother, for fear of raising the obvious question of what he needed such a coat for). The long black coat was lined with thick material over his chest and stomach, and inside pockets to store all manner of knives, cloves of garlic, and a flask of holy water, which he'd blessed himself. He wore his quiver of stakes on his back, and a thick leather collar, one that he'd commissioned from an Elizabethtown tanner, around his neck.

When word of those twisted corpses reached Little Pigeon Creek, Abe set off for the river at once.

I told Father that I had found work on a flatboat bound for New Orleans, and that I would return with $20 pay in six weeks' time. I did so in spite of having received no such offer of work, and despite having no idea where I would find the money. I could think of no other way that Father would have permitted such a long absence.

Contrary to his infallibly "honest" image, Abe wasn't above lying so long as it served a noble purpose. This was the chance he'd ached for those four long years. The chance to test his skills. His tools. The chance to feel the exhilaration of watching a vampire fade away at his feet. Seeing the fear in its eyes.

There were far better trackers than Abraham Lincoln. Men with far more knowledge of the Ohio River. But there was nary a human being in Kentucky or Indiana with a more extensive knowledge of mysterious disappearances and unsolved murders.

When I heard a description of the bodies at Jeffersonville, I knew at once that a vampire was responsible, and I had a very good notion of where it was going. I remembered reading about a similar case in Dugre's On the History of the Mississippi River—one that had confounded settlers almost fifty years prior. Children had gone missing from their beds in small towns all along the river—beginning in Natchez, and continuing to Donaldsonville. North to south. The bodies had been found in groups along the river, badly decomposed. Unnaturally so—each with nothing more than small cuts on their appendages. Like that vampire, I was willing to bet that this one was heading south with the current. Furthermore, I was willing to bet that it was on a boat. And if it was on a boat, it would reach Evansville sooner or later.

That was where Abe lay in wait on the night of Thursday, June 30th, 1825, hiding behind brush on the wooded banks of the Ohio.

The moon was blessedly full, revealing every detail of the night… the light fog rolling over the river's surface, the dewdrops on the leaves of my hiding place, the silhouettes of sleeping birds on a tree branch, and the flatboat tied up not thirty yards from where I hid. It looked no different from any of the small barges one saw up and down the river: forty feet by twelve; fashioned from rough wooden planks; all but a third of its deck taken up by covered living quarters—yet my eyes had been fixed on this particular boat for hours, for I was sure that there was a vampire inside.

Abe had spent days watching the occasional flatboat come ashore at Evansville. He'd scrutinized every man who had stepped onto land looking for the telltale signs he'd read so much about: pale skin, avoidance of sunlight, fear of crosses. He'd even followed a few "suspicious" boatmen as they went about their business in town. But none of this had yielded anything. In the end, it was the flatboat that didn't stop that drew his suspicion.

I had been close to retiring. The sun had all but set, and any boats upriver would be tying up for the night. And then I saw it. The outline of a flatboat passed—barely visible in the darkness. It was curious that a boat would pass one of the busiest towns on this part of the river without tying up. Even more curious that it would do so at night.

Abe ran along the river, determined to follow this strange boat (which as far as he could see was being piloted by no one) for as long as he could.

Heavy rains had quickened the current, and I found it difficult to keep pace. The flatboat continued to slip away, and when it disappeared around a bend in the river, I feared I had lost it for good.

But after a half hour in a near flat-out sprint, Abe caught up. The boat had tied up on the same bank a few miles outside of town, a small plank leading from its deck to the shore. He set up a good distance away and began an all-night vigil. Hungry, exhausted hours passed, but Abe kept his post.

I had been still for so long that I feared my legs might betray me when I needed them. But I dared not strike until I saw him. Until I saw the creature emerge from his sleeping place. I looked down at the ax in my hands to ensure that it was still there. I shook from the anticipation of watching it fly into his chest. Of seeing the fear on his face as the last of him left this world.

There was a faint rustling of leaves and snapping of twigs from the north. Someone approached, walking through the woods along the bank. Abe steadied his breathing. He felt the handle of

the ax in his right hand. Imagined the sound it would make as it tore through skin, and bone, and lung.

I had been waiting for the creature to emerge these long hours. It had never occurred to me that the vampire might already be about. It mattered not. I readied my ax and waited to get a look at him.

"Him" turned out to a small woman wearing a black dress and matching bonnet. The shape of her body suggested she was quite old, though she walked along the uneven riverbank with ease.

The possibility of it being a woman had never entered my mind, much less an old one. The madness of what I was doing suddenly rang clear. What evidence had I? What evidence beyond a suspicion that this was the boat of a vampire? Was I merely going to kill whomever it belonged to and hope that my theory proved correct? Was I prepared to take the head of this old woman without being absolutely certain?

Abe didn't have to agonize for long, for as she drew closer, he could see something in her arms. Something white.

It was a child.

I watched as she carried him through the woods [and] toward the boat. He was no older than five years, wearing a white sleeping gown—his arms and legs hanging freely. I could see the blood on his collar. On his sleeves. I could not strike from such a distance, for fear that an errant ax blade might kill the boy (if indeed he lived).

Abe watched the vampire reach the flatboat and start up the small plank, then stop halfway up.

Her body became rigid. She smelled the air, as I had seen animals do when they caught the scent of danger. She looked across the darkness to the opposite bank, then toward me.

Abe froze. Not a breath. Not a twitch. Satisfied there was no danger, the old woman continued up the plank and onto the flatboat.

A sickness came over me. A rage—directed more at myself than she. How dare I sit idly and let this boy be taken? How dare I allow something as petty as fear—as insignificant as my own life—keep me from what must be done? No! No, I should sooner die at her hands than die from shame! I rose from hiding and ran toward the river. Toward the boat. She heard my footfalls at once—seized on my direction and dropped the boy to the deck. Here! Here was my chance! I raised my ax and let it fly. Watched it spin toward her. Despite all appearances to the contrary, she was quite nimble—moving from the path of my ax and condemning it to the

bottom of the Ohio River. I kept running, convinced that my strength and practice would win the day yet. Convinced that there was no alternative. Reaching into my coat pockets, I found a hunting knife for each hand. She waited for me, those clawed fingers outstretched. Black eyes to match her bonnet. My feet hit the plank. I leapt at her, and she swatted me away as a horse's tail swats a fly, sending me onto the deck and exorcising the air from my lungs. I rolled onto my back, every ounce of me aching, and held the knives in front of me to keep her at bay. These she grabbed by their blades and pulled from my hands—leaving me with nothing more than bare fists to defend myself. I sprang to my feet and lunged at the wretched old demon, my fists flying wildly. I may as well have been blindfolded—such was the ease with which she moved from the path of each strike. All at once I felt a searing pain in my middle—one that nearly knocked me from my feet and onto the sleeping boy below.

The force of the vampire's fists had broken several of Abe's ribs. He staggered as she hit him in the stomach again… again. He coughed, sending flecks of blood flying onto her face.

Here she paused, dragging a foul finger across her cheek and touching it to her tongue. "Rich," she said with a smile. I struggled to keep my feet, knowing that if I fell again, it would be for the last time. I thought of my grandfather—how his face had been crushed by the fists of a vampire. How he had failed to land even one blow in return. I refused to meet the same fate. I used her pause to my advantage, finding the last of the weapons in my coat, a small knife. I threw myself at her with the last of my strength and thrust its blade into her belly. This only improved her good humor, for she grabbed my wrist and dragged it along her gut, cutting herself and laughing all the while. I felt my feet leave the deck; felt her hands on my throat. In what seemed an instant, I was drowning. She held my head beneath the river—my back pressed against the side of the boat. My feet kicking wildly. I could do nothing but look up into her face. Her wrinkles smoothed by the water. Then thoughts turned from struggle, and a strange joy infected me. It would all be over soon, and I would rest. Those black eyes changing shape above me as the water began to calm. As I began to calm. I would be with her soon. It was night.

Then he came.

Abe was barely conscious when the old woman disappeared—pulled backward onto the boat. Her hands no longer holding him down, he sank gently toward the bottom of the river.

I was pulled from the depths by the hand of God. Placed

upon the deck of the tiny boat next to a sleeping boy in a white gown. From this lowly vantage I watched the rest play out—slipping in and out of sleep. I heard the woman scream: “Traitor!” I saw the outline of a man struggling with her. I saw her head fall to the deck in front of where I lay. Her body was not attached to it. And then I saw no more.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

II

"And oftentimes, to win us to our harm, the instruments of darkness tell us truths, win us with honest trifles, to betray—" *

I woke in a windowless room to a man reading by oil light. He was perhaps five-and-twenty—slender, with dark, shoulder-length hair. Upon seeing me wake, he stopped reading and placed a marker in the pages of a thick leather volume. I asked the only question that mattered. The one that had troubled my dreams.

"The boy… is he—"

"Safe. Placed where he will be found."

His accent betrayed no particular origin. Was he an Englishman? An American? A Scot? He sat beside me in an intricately carved high-back chair, one leg of his dark trousers folded neatly over the other, the sleeves of his blue shirt rolled to the elbows, and a small silver cross hanging around his neck. My eyes came around, and I traced the shape of the room by the light of his oil lamp. Its walls seemed made from stones piled one on top of the other—the space between them packed with clay. Each boasted no fewer than two gold-framed paintings; some as many as six. Scenes of bare-breasted native women carrying water from a stream. Sun-soaked landscapes. A portrait of a young lady hanging beside a portrait of an old one, their features remarkably similar. I saw my belongings carefully laid out on a chest in the far corner of the room. My coat. My knives. My ax—miraculously rescued from the bottom of the Ohio. Surrounding these, some of the most elegant furnishings I had ever seen. And books! Stacks and stacks of books of every conceivable thickness and binding.

"My name is Henry Sturges," he said. "This is my home."

"Abraham… Lincoln."

"The 'father of many.' A pleasure, indeed."

I tried to sit up, but met with such pain as to bring me to the edge of fainting. I lay on my back and looked down my chin. My chest and stomach were covered in wet bandages.

"You'll forgive the intrusion on your modesty, but you were quite injured. Don't be alarmed by the smell, either. Your dressings have been steeped in an assortment of oils—all very good for healing wounds, I assure you. Not as beneficial to the senses, I'm afraid."

“How…”

“Two days and nights. I must say, the first dozen hours were rather tenuous. I wasn’t sure you would ever wake. It’s a compliment to your health that you sur—”

“No… how did you kill her?”

“Ah. It wasn’t difficult, really. She was quite frail, you know.”

It seemed an absurd thing to say to one whose body had been shattered by her “frailty.”

“And, I might add, quite preoccupied with drowning you. In that regard I suppose I owe you a debt of gratitude for distrac— may I ask you something?”

My silence proved a suitable substitute for “yes.”

“How many vampires have you slain?”

It was shocking to hear a stranger say the word. Until that day I had heard no one other than my father speak of them as real creatures. I thought briefly of boasting, but answered him honestly.

“One,” said Abe.

“Yes… yes, that seems about right.”

“And you, sir. How many have you slain?”

“One.”

I could make no sense of it. How could someone with such skill—who had so easily slain a vampire—have so little practice?

“Are you… not a vampire hunter?”

Henry laughed heartily at the idea.

“I can say with certainty that I am not. Though it would be an interesting choice of trade, to be sure.”

In my muddled state I was slow to get his meaning. As it dawned—as I felt the truth of it sink into my skin, I was at once terrified and furious. He had killed the vampire woman. Not to save me from death, but to save me for himself. Now there was no pain. Now there was only the fire in my chest. I struck at him with all my strength—all my rage. But my arms were abruptly stopped on their way to his throat. He had fashioned bindings around my wrists. I screamed wildly. Pulled at the restraints until my face turned red. A madman. Henry looked on without so much as a blink of consternation.

“Yes,” said Henry. “I thought that might be your reaction.”

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

III

For the next two days and nights, I refused to say a word. Refused to eat, or sleep, or look my host in the eye. How could I, knowing that my life might end at any moment? Knowing that a vampire (my sworn enemy! my mother's murderer!) was never more than a few steps away? How much of my blood had he tasted while I slept? I heard his shoes climb up and down a wooden staircase. Heard the creaks and clangs of a delicate door being opened and shut. But I heard nothing of the outside world. No birdsong. No church bells. I knew not when it was day or night. My only measurement of time was the sound of the match striking. The woodstove burning. The kettle boiling. Every few hours, he entered the room with a steaming bowl of broth, sat by my bed, and offered to feed it to me. I promptly refused. My refusal being accepted with like promptness, Henry picked up a volume of The Selected Works of William Shakespeare and continued reading where he'd left off. Such was our little game. For two days, I refused to eat or listen. For two days, he continued to cook and speak. As he read, I tried to occupy my mind with trivial thoughts. With songs or stories of my own creation. Anything but give this vampire the satisfaction of my attention. But on the third day, momentarily bested by my hunger, I could not help but accept when Henry came offering a spoonful of broth. I swore that I would only accept the first. Just enough to quiet the pain in my stomach, nothing more.

Abe ate three bowlfuls without stopping. When he had finally eaten his fill, he and Henry sat in silence "for what seemed an hour's time," until Abe finally spoke:

"Why haven't you killed me?"

It sickened me to look at him. I cared not for his kindness. I cared not that he had saved my life. Treated my wounds and fed me. I cared not who he was. Only what he was.

"And pray, what reason have I to kill you?"

"You are a vampire."

"And so the rest of me is written? Have I not the mind of a man? Have I not the same needs? To be fed and clothed and comforted? Judge us not equally, Abraham."

Now it was I who could not help but laugh.

“You speak as one who does not murder to be ‘fed’! Whose ‘needs’ do not take mothers from their children!”

“Ah,” said Henry. “And it was one of my kind who took her from you?”

All traces of reason left me. There was something about the ease with which he spoke of it. The callousness. The madman returned. I struck at him, knocking the soup bowl to the stone floor in the process. Shattering it. I would have torn his face off but for the bindings around my wrists.

“Never speak of her! NEVER!”

Henry waited until my outburst had passed, then knelt on the floor and collected the pieces of the shattered bowl.

“You must forgive me,” said Henry. “It has been quite a long time since I was your age. I forget the passions of youth. I shall endeavor to choose my words more carefully.”

The last of the pieces in his hands, he stood and made to leave, but paused in the doorway.

“Ask yourself… are we so unalike, you and I? Are we not both unwilling servants of my condition? Did we not both lose something significant to it? You a mother? I a life?”

With this he disappeared, leaving me to my anger. I shouted after him: “Why haven’t you killed me!” His answer came calmly from the next room. “Some people, Abraham, are just too interesting to kill.”

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

IV

Abe healed with each passing day. He took food willingly, and listened to Henry read Shakespeare with increasing interest.

Though the sight of him still held the power to incite anger or apprehension, this power grew weaker as my body grew stronger. He loosened my bindings so that I could feed myself. Left books by my bed so that I could read alone. The more I came to know of his mind, the more I began to consider the possibility that he had no murderous designs on me. We spoke of books. Of the great cities of the world. We even spoke of my mother. Mostly, we spoke of vampires. On this subject I had more questions than words to ask them with. I wanted to know everything. For four long years, I had stumbled in the dark—relying on assumptions, and hoping that Providence alone would bring me face-to-face with a vampire. Here, at last, was my chance to learn everything: How they could live on blood alone. Whether they had a soul. How they came to exist at all.

Unfortunately, Henry didn't have the answers to any of these questions. Like most vampires, he had spent a good deal of time obsessing over his "lineage" in an attempt to uncover "the first vampire," hoping the discovery would lead to some deeper truth, perhaps even a cure. And like all before him, he had failed. Even the most resourceful vampires are only able to go back two or three generations. "This," explained Henry, "is a product of our solitary nature."

In truth, vampires rarely socialize—and almost never with their own kind. The scarcity of easy blood breeds vicious competition, and their nomadic lifestyle makes it difficult to form lasting bonds. In rare cases, vampires might work in pairs or packs—but these alliances are usually born of desperation, and almost always temporary.

"As to our ancestry," said Henry, "I am afraid that it shall forever remain shrouded in darkness. There are some who believe that we began as a wicked spirit or demon, passed from one unfortunate soul to the next. A curse propagated through the blood. Others believe that we owe our parentage to the devil himself. And there are more still, myself among them, who have come to believe that our 'curse' never began at all—that vampires

and man are merely different animals. Two species that have existed side by side since Adam and Eve were expelled from paradise. One race gifted with superior ability and length of life; the other more fragile and fleeting, but gifted with superior numbers. The only certainty is that we shall never be certain."

When it came to the experience of being a vampire, however, Henry was endlessly knowledgeable. He had a gift for explaining his condition in a way that I could grasp at such a young age. A gift for humanizing the notion of immortality.

"Living men are bound by time," he said. "Thus, their lives have an urgency. This gives them ambition. Makes them choose those things that are most important; cling more tightly to that which they hold dear. Their lives have seasons, and rites of passage, and consequences. And ultimately, an end. But what of a life with no urgency? What then of ambition? What then of love?

"The first hundred years are exciting ones, yes. The world is one of infinite indulgence. We master the art of feeding—learning where to cast our net and how best to enjoy our catch. We travel the world, beholding the moonlit wonders of civilization; amassing small fortunes by stealing valuables from our countless victims. We fulfill every imaginable desire of the flesh… oh, it's all great fun.

"After a hundred years of conquest, our bodies are full to the point of bursting—but our minds have been left to starve. By now, most of us have built a resistance to the ill effects of sunlight. The world of the living, therefore, is no longer beyond our reach—and we are free to experience all that darkness had kept from us in our first century. We pore through libraries, dissecting the classics; see the world's great works of art with our own eyes. We take up music and painting, write poetry. We return to our most beloved cities to experience them anew. Our fortunes grow vaster. Our powers greater.

"By the third century, however, the intoxication of eternity has worn rather thin. Every imaginable desire has been fulfilled. The thrill of taking a life experienced again and again and again. And though we have all the comforts of the world, we find no comfort in them. It is in this century, Abraham, that most of us turn to suicide—either by starving ourselves, staking ourselves through the heart, devising some method of taking our own heads, or, in the most desperate cases, by burning ourselves alive. Only the very strongest of us—those possessing exceptional will, and driven by a timeless purpose—survive into our fourth or fifth centuries and beyond."

That a man who had been freed from the inescapable fate of

death would choose it for himself—this I did not understand, and I told Henry as much.

"Without death," he answered, "life is meaningless. It is a story that can never be told. A song that can never be sung. For how would one finish it?"

Soon Abe was well enough to sit up in bed, and Henry was comfortable enough to do away with his restraints altogether. Having failed to get answers to his more general vampire questions, Abe turned to a bottomless well of specifics. On sunlight:

"When we are newly made, the slightest sunlight blisters our skin and renders us ill, much the same way an excess of sunlight can sicken a man. Over time we become resistant to these effects, and are able to walk freely during the day—so long as we stray from harsh light. Our eyes, however, never adjust."

On garlic:

"I'm afraid it merely makes you easier to perceive from a distance."

On sleeping in coffins:

"I cannot speak for others, but I am quite comfortable in a bed."

When Abe reached the question of how one becomes a vampire, Henry paused.

"I shall tell you how I came to be one."

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

V

Abe committed the following to his journal on August 30th, 1825, shortly after his return to Little Pigeon Creek.

What follows is the story exactly as Henry related it to me. I have neither embellished, nor withheld, nor verified any part of it. I merely duplicate it here so that some record of it exists. “On 22nd July, in the year 1587,” Henry began, “three ships carrying 117 English souls landed on northern Roanoke Island, in what is today called North Carolina.”

Among this teeming mass of men, women, and children was a twenty-three-year-old blacksmith’s apprentice named Henry O. Sturges, average in height and build, with long, dark hair to the middle of his back. He was joined by his new wife, Edeva.

“She was but a day younger and an inch shorter than I, with hair of the finest flaxen and eyes a strange shade of brown. There has never been a more delicate, a more fetching creature in all the annals of time.”

They had just experienced a harrowing voyage, one plagued by unseasonably bad weather and uncommonly bad luck. While there was nothing unusual about sickness and death on an Atlantic crossing (sixteenth-century ships were typically moldy, rat-infested breeding grounds for any number of air- or food-borne illnesses), the accidental demise of two people on two separate occasions was ominous enough to raise alarm.

Both deaths occurred aboard the Lyon, the largest of the three-vessel caravan, and the one personally captained by John White. White, a forty-seven-year-old artist, was handpicked by Sir Walter Raleigh for the job of establishing a permanent English presence in the New World. He’d been part of the first attempt to colonize Roanoke two years earlier—an attempt that failed when the colonists, all men, ran desperately short of supplies and hitched a ride back to England with Sir Francis Drake, who, as fate would have it, had decided to anchor nearby during a break from raiding Spanish ships.

“This time ’round,” Henry said, “Raleigh’s plan was more ambitious. Instead of brusque sailors, he sent young families. Families that would put down roots. Produce children. Build churches and schoolhouses. It was his opportunity to build ‘a new

England in the New World.' For Edeva and me, it was an opportunity to leave a home that held little in the way of happiness. All told we were ninety men, nine children, and seventeen women, including John White's own daughter, Eleanor Dare."

Eleanor, who was eight months pregnant, was joined by her husband, Ananias, aboard the Lyon. She was an "uncommonly pretty" twenty-four-year-old, with a shock of red hair and freckled face. One can only imagine the discomfort she felt as the 120-ton ship pitched about in the oppressive July heat—heat that turned the innards of the ships into giant steam ovens.

"Even some of the surest-footed sailors found themselves green-faced and bent over the railings when the seas kicked up and the sun beat down on us."

The first of the two deaths occurred on Sunday, May 24th, a little more than two weeks after the colonists set sail from Plymouth. A ship's mate named Blum (or Bloom; Henry never learned the correct spelling) had been in the crow's nest at night, charged with keeping a sharp eye out for distant silhouettes on the star-filled horizon. Spanish carracks—with a reputation for attacking and pillaging English ships—were a very real threat. Shortly after midnight, the ship's pilot, Simon Ferdinando (who'd already gained fame through previous expeditions to Maine and Virginia), recalled hearing a "crash" on the main deck. Moments later, he found himself standing over the lifeless body of Mr. Blum—whose neck was severely broken.

"Mr. Ferdinando thought it strange that an experienced sailor—particularly one who'd sworn off drink—could've taken such a fall in calm seas. But such was life on the Atlantic. Accidents happened. Other than a few prayers for the unfortunate man's soul, little was said about Mr. Blum among the passengers and crew."

Captain White recorded the matter rather succinctly and dispassionately in his log: Man fell from crowe's nest. Deade. Throwne overboarde.

"Had that been the only incident during our crossing, we might have counted ourselves fortunate. But our nerves were tested again on Tuesday, June 30th—when Elizabeth Barrington vanished into the night forever."

Elizabeth, an almost comically short, curly-haired girl of sixteen, had been literally dragged aboard by her father and several shipmates, kicking, screaming, and biting the whole way. To her, the Lyon was a prison ship.

Months earlier, she had fallen hard for a young clerk in her

father's law practice. Knowing that the match would never warrant approval, the two young lovers carried on a secret affair, the discovery of which caused a minor sensation in the Inns of Court and severely damaged the reputation of her father among his fellow solicitors. Embarrassed, Mr. Barrington seized the opportunity to start a new life across the Atlantic, and dragged his insolent daughter along for good measure.

"That Tuesday, the weather grew ever violent as our caravan sailed into a wall of storm clouds. By nightfall, all but a few deckhands had retreated below to escape the pounding wind and rain. The ship was tossed so severely that Captain White ordered all candles snuffed, for fear that the waves could knock one over and start a fire. With Edeva in my arms, I huddled in total darkness below deck—felt the dizzying motion of the ship; heard the groans of wooden planks and fellow passengers being sick. I know that Elizabeth Barrington had been there with us when the lights went out. I had seen her myself. But she was not there in the morning."

The storm had passed, and the sun had returned to its oppressive perch. Because Elizabeth often kept to herself below, it wasn't until midmorning that anyone noticed her absence. Passengers called her name but received no answer. A full search of the ship turned up nothing. A second search, which included bags of flour being emptied and barrels of gunpowder sifted through, was likewise fruitless. She was gone. Captain White made another succinct and dispassionate entry in his log: Girle fell overboarde in a storme. Deade.

"Privately, we all knew that the unhappy girl had taken her own life. That she had leapt into the sea and drowned. Prayers were said for her soul (though we knew it to be condemned to hell—suicide being an unforgivable sin in the eyes of God)."

The last three weeks of their voyage were free of further accidents and blessed with better weather. Even so, the sight of dry land was an especially welcome one. The colonists set about felling trees, rebuilding abandoned shelters, planting crops, and making contact with the natives—particularly the Croatoan, who'd welcomed the English in the past. But this time their truce proved short-lived. Exactly one week after the first of John White's ships landed on Roanoke Island, one of his colonists, George Howe, was found facedown in the shallow waters of Albemarle Sound. He'd been fishing alone when a group of "savages" took him by surprise. White pieced the attack together based on the evidence at the scene. From his log:

These Savages being secretly hidden among high reedes,

where oftentimes they find the Deere asleep, and so kill them, espied our man wading in the water alone, almost naked, without any weapon, save only a smal forked sticke, catching Crabs therewithal, and also being strayed two miles from his company, and shot at him in the water, where they gave him sixteen wounds with their arrowes: and after they had slaine him with their wooden swords, they beat his head in pieces, and fled over the water.

White concluded that Howe was shot with sixteen "arrowes" because the body had sixteen small puncture wounds in it.

"In truth, no arrows were found in or near Mr. Howe. Governor White also omitted an important detail from his record —that the body had already begun to decompose, even though Mr. Howe had only been dead several hours before being discovered."

On August 18th, the colony turned its thoughts from the Croatoan and rejoiced at the arrival of its first baby, Virginia Dare —John White's granddaughter. She was the first English baby born in the New World, and like her mother, possessed a shock of red hair. The birth was attended by the colony's only doctor, Thomas Crowley.

"Crowley was a plump, balding man of fifty-six. Tall in stature, he had a kind, pockmarked face, and a well-known love of jokes. For this and his skill as a physician he was held in high regard, and few things gave him a greater thrill than making a patient forget his troubles in laughter."

Satisfied that his colony was off to a strong start (the unpleasantness of Mr. Howe's demise notwithstanding), John White sailed back to England to report on their progress and bring back supplies. He left behind 113 men, women, and children—including his infant grandchild, Virginia. If all went well, he would return in several months with food, building materials, and goods to trade with the natives.

"All did not go well."

A series of events conspired to keep John White in England for the next three years.

First, his crew refused to sail back during the dangerous winter months. The summer crossing had been dangerous and deadly enough. Unable to find a replacement crew, White endured what must have been a maddening, worrisome winter. By the time spring finally arrived, England was at war with Spain, and Queen Elizabeth needed every worthy ship at her disposal. That included the vessels White had planned to take back to the New World. He scrambled and found a pair of smaller, older ships

that Her Majesty didn't require. But shortly into the voyage, both of these were captured and plundered by Spanish pirates. With no supplies left for his colonists, White turned around and headed back to England. The war with Spain raged on for two more years, leaving John White stranded in his home country, endlessly frustrated. In 1590 (having given up on bringing back supplies), he was finally able to secure passage on a merchant ship. On August 18th, his granddaughter Virginia's third birthday, he set foot on Roanoke Island once again.

They were gone.

Every last man, woman, and child. His daughter. His baby granddaughter. The Barringtons. Gone. His colony had simply vanished into thin air. The buildings remained exactly as they had been (though weather-beaten and overgrown). Tools and supplies were exactly where they belonged. Surrounded by rich soil and abundant wildlife, how could they have starved? If there was some kind of pestilence, where were the mass graves? If there was a battle, where were signs? It didn't make any sense.

There were only two clues of any note: the word "Croatoan" carved into one of the fence posts of the perimeter wall, and the letters "CRO" carved into the bark of a nearby tree. Had the Croatoan attacked the colony? It seemed unlikely. They would have burned it to the ground, for one thing. And there would be bodies. Evidence. Something. White guessed (or hoped, anyway) that the cryptic carvings meant the colonists, for whatever reason, had resettled on nearby Croatoan Island. But he wouldn't get a chance to prove his theory. The weather was taking a turn for the worse, and the crew of his merchant ship refused to remain any longer. After three years spent trying to return, and only a few hours on dry land, he was given a choice: return to England and try to mount another expedition, or be left to fend for himself on a strange continent with no idea where his countrymen were—or if they were alive at all. White sailed away, never to set foot in the New World again. He spent the rest of his days haunted by grief, guilt, and above all, bewilderment over the disappearance of his 113 colonists.

"I think," said Henry, "that it is better he never learned the truth."

Shortly after Governor White's first return to England, the people of Roanoke were beset by a strange illness, which produced an acute fever in its victims. This fever led to delusions, coma, and eventually death.

"Dr. Crowley thought the disease a native one. He was powerless to curb its effects. In the three months following

Governor White's departure, ten of us succumbed to this plague. In the three months after that, a dozen more. Their bodies were carried a distance into the woods and buried, lest the sickness contaminate the soil near our settlement. We grew ever more fearful that ours would be the next body carried off. A near-constant vigil was kept on the island's eastern shore, in hopes that sails would soon be spotted there. But none were. It is likely that things would have continued thus, had not the hideous discovery been made."

Eleanor Dare couldn't sleep. Not while her husband fought for his life a mere fifty yards away. She dressed, wrapped sleeping baby Virginia in a blanket, and walked through the freezing air to Dr. Crowley's building, resigned to spending a restless night by her husband's side in prayer.

"Upon entering, Mrs. Dare was met with the ghastly sight of Crowley with his mouth around her husband's neck. He withdrew and presented his fangs, drawing screams from her. Thus alerted, several of our men ran into Crowley's building with their swords and crossbows, only to find the woman slaughtered, and the infant Virginia in the vampire's claws. Crowley warned the men to retreat. They refused. Having no knowledge of vampires, the men perished at once."

Their screams woke the rest of the colonists, including Henry.

"I dressed and told Edeva to do the same, thinking it an attack by the natives. I charged into the night with my pistol determined to protect my home to the last. But on reaching the clearing in the center of our village, I was met with an incredible sight. A terrifying sight. Thomas Crowley—his eyes black, a pair of white razors in his mouth—tearing Jack Barrington in half, spilling his innards everywhere. I saw friends scattered on the ground. Some with limbs missing. Some with heads missing. Crowley took notice of me and advanced. I leveled my pistol and fired. The ball found its mark, piercing the center of his chest. But this failed to slow him in the least. He continued to advance. I am not ashamed to admit that all courage left me. I could think only of escape. Only of Edeva, and the unborn child in her belly."

Henry turned and ran the fifty yards home as fast as he could. Edeva was already waiting in the doorway, and he hardly slowed as he grabbed her hand and continued toward the tree line. The coast. Let us make haste to the coas—

"I could hear him running behind us. Each step breaking the earth. Each one closer than the last. We ran into the trees. Ran until our lungs burned—until Edeva began to slow, and I felt his steps behind us."

We will never see the coast.

"I remember none of it. Only that I woke on my stomach and knew at once that my wounds were mortal. My body lay shattered—my limbs all but useless. Dried blood over my eyes rendering me half blind. By the sound of Edeva's labored breath, I knew that she was even closer to the end than I. She lay on her side, her yellow dress stained with blood. Her yellow hair matted with it. I dragged myself to her with two broken arms. Dragged my eyes close to hers—open and distant. I ran my hand through her hair and simply looked at her. Simply watched her breathing slow, all the while whispering, 'Don't be afraid, love.' And then she stopped."

By sunrise, Crowley had dragged most of his fellow settlers into the woods. He'd been left no alternative. Explaining a plague was easy. Almost as easy as explaining a man falling from a crow's nest, or a girl jumping overboard, or a fisherman being attacked by savages. But screams in the night, followed by the disappearance of four men, a woman, and an infant? That he couldn't explain. They would question him. Discover him. And that, he couldn't have. One by one, he dragged their battered bodies away. Of his 112 fellow settlers, only one had been spared his wrath.

Crowley had hesitated to kill Virginia Dare. A baby that he had personally delivered? The first English soul born in the New World? These things had sentimental value. Besides, she would have no memory of what had happened here, and a young female companion might prove useful in the lonely years to come.

"He returned from the woods with the baby in his arms. I daresay he was surprised to see me alive—though barely so—struggling to keep my feet while I carved the letters 'CRO' into a tree with a knife. My dying effort to expose the identity of my murderer. Of my wife and child's murderer. His shock subsided, Crowley could not help his laughter, for I had unwittingly given him a brilliant idea. Setting the baby down and taking my knife, he carved the word "Croatoan" onto a nearby post, all the while smiling at the thought of John White massacring scores of unsuspecting natives in retaliation."

Crowley prepared to take Henry's head. But here he hesitated again.

"He was suddenly struck by the realization that he would then be the only English-speaking man for three thousand miles in any direction—a lonely prospect for one with such a love of jokes. Who, then, to laugh at them? I watched him kneel over me and cut his wrist with a fingernail, letting the blood spill over my

face and into my mouth."

Crowley buried the last of the colonists and headed south toward the Spanish territories, carrying a crying baby in one arm and the half-dead body of a young Henry in the other. Soon, after the sickness and the hallucinations passed—after his bones mended themselves—his companion would open his eyes to a new life in a New World. But first, Thomas Crowley would celebrate by feasting on the first English blood born to it.

He had decided to feast on Virginia Dare.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

VI

Twenty-one days after Henry carried him into the house unconscious, Abe was well enough to leave his room and take a tour.

I was astonished to find that my windowless room was, in fact, part of a windowless house. A house dug entirely out of the earth—its walls and floors meticulously lined with stone and clay. A kitchen where he had prepared my food on the woodstove. A library where he had replenished my supply of books. A second bedchamber. All lit by oil light, and all decorated with elegant furnishings and gold-framed paintings, as if Henry thought these his windows to the outside world.

"This," said Henry, "this has been my purpose these past seven years. Building this home, one shovelful of dirt at a time."

All four rooms centered on a small stairwell. Here was the only place lit in part by the sun, its soft light streaming down from above. Here were the wooden stairs that I had heard Henry climb up and down, up and down, countless times. We followed them up to a flimsy wooden door—sunlight squeaking through the cracks. Opening it and stepping through, I was surprised to find myself standing in a small log cabin. This was modestly furnished, complete with a working woodstove, rug, and bed. Henry donned a pair of spectacles with dark lenses as we stepped into the day. Now I could see the genius of his design, for from the outside, his home looked nothing more than a modest cabin on a lonely wooded hillside. "Shall we, then?" asked Henry.

So began the only real schooling Abraham Lincoln ever had.

Every morning for the next four weeks, Abe and Henry climbed the stairs to the false cabin. Every day, Henry taught him something more about finding and fighting vampires.

Every night, theory was put into practice as Henry challenged Abe to hunt him in the dark.

Gone were my cloves of garlic and flasks of holy water. Gone were my knives. What remained were my stakes, my ax, and my mind. It was this last weapon which Henry spent the majority of his time improving—teaching me how to hide from a vampire's animal senses. How to use its quickness to my advantage. How to drive it from hiding, and how to kill it without putting my limbs

(and neck) at risk. But for all of Henry's lessons, nothing was more valuable than the time we spent trying to kill each other. At first I had been astonished by his speed and strength—convinced there was no way I would ever be its equal. Over time, however, I noticed that it took him longer and longer to subdue me. I even found myself landing the occasional strike. Soon, it was not uncommon for me to best him three times out of ten.

"I find myself in a curious position," said Henry after Abe had managed to pin him one night. "I feel rather like a rabbit that has taken a fox for its pupil."

Abe smiled.

"And I like a mouse who has taken a cat for its tutor."

Early autumn came, and with it an end to Abe's stay. He and Henry stood outside the false cabin in the morning sun—Henry with his dark glasses, Abe carrying a few belongings and food for his journey. He was already weeks overdue at Little Pigeon Creek, and likely to get a thrashing from his father for coming home without the money he'd promised to earn.

Henry, however, saw fit to remedy this with a gift of twenty-five dollars—five more than I'd promised my father. Naturally, pride demanded I refuse this gift as too generous. Naturally, Henry's pride demanded I accept it. I did, and thanked him profusely. There was much I had thought of saying at this moment: Thanking him for his kindness and hospitality. Thanking him for saving my life. For teaching me how to preserve it in the future. I thought of apologizing for the harshness with which I had first judged him. However, none of this proved necessary, for Henry quickly extended a hand and said, "Let us say good-bye, then say no more." We shook hands, and I was off. But there was something I had forgotten to ask. Something I had wondered since we first met. I turned back to him: "Henry… what were you doing at the river that night?" He looked strangely stern upon hearing this. More so than I had seen him the whole of my stay.

"There is no honor in taking sleeping children from their beds," he said, "or feasting upon the innocent. I have given you the means of delivering punishment to those who do… in time, I shall give you their names."

With that, he turned and walked back toward the cabin.

"Judge us not equally, Abraham. We may all deserve hell, but some of us deserve it sooner than others."

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

FOUR

A Truth Too Terrible

The Autocrat of all the Russias will resign his crown, and proclaim his subjects free republicans sooner than will our American masters voluntarily give up their slaves.

—Abraham Lincoln, in a letter to George Robertson
August 15th, 1855

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

I

My dear sister is gone….

In 1826, Sarah Lincoln had married Little Pigeon Creek neighbor Aaron Grigsby, six years her senior. The couple had moved into a cabin close to both of their families, and within nine months announced that they were expecting a child. Shortly after she went into labor, on January 20th, 1828, Sarah had begun to lose an unusual amount of blood. Rather than fetch help, Aaron had tried to deliver the baby himself, too frightened to leave his wife's side. By the time he'd realized how grave the situation was and run for a doctor, it was too late.

Sarah was twenty years old. She and the stillborn baby boy were buried together in the Little Pigeon Baptist Church Cemetery. On hearing the news, Abe sobbed uncontrollably. It was as if he'd lost his mother all over again. On hearing the details of his brother-in-law's hesitation, Abe's grief was joined by rage.

The no-good son of a bitch let her lie there and die. For this I shall never forgive him.

"Never" turned out to be only a few short years. Aaron Grigsby died in 1831.

By the time he turned nineteen, Abraham Lincoln had covered nearly every inch of every page in his journal with ink (in ever-smaller lettering as he neared the end). It held seven years of remarkable records. Insights into his disdain for his father. His hatred of vampires. Accounts of his earliest battles with the walking dead.

It also held no fewer than sixteen folded letters between its pages. The first had arrived barely a month after Abe left Henry's cabin and returned to Little Pigeon Creek.

Dear Abraham,

I trust this finds you well. Below is the name of someone who deserves it sooner. You will find him in the town of Rising Sun—three days upriver from Louisville. Do not construe this letter as an expectation of action. The choice is yours, always. I merely wish to offer the opportunity for continued study, and provide some small measure of relief for the injustices done you, as you will no doubt seek their redress on your own.

Beneath this was the name Silas Williams and the word "cobbler." The letter was signed only with an H. Abe rode to Rising Sun a week later, telling his father that he was off to Louisville to look for work.

I had expected to find the place plagued by a rash of disappearances or pestilence of some sort. However, the people seemed in excellent spirits, and their town in excellent health. I walked among them with my weapons hidden beneath my long coat (for it had occurred to me that the sight of a tall stranger with an ax might engender concern among the citizenry). I intruded upon the kindness of a passerby, and asked where I might find the local cobbler, for my shoes were very badly worn. Having been directed to a modest shop not more than fifty yards away, I entered and found a bearded, bespectacled man hard at work—his walls covered with worn and dismembered shoes. He was a meek creature of some five-and-thirty years, and he was alone. "Silas Williams?" I asked.

"Yes?"

I cut his head off with my ax and left.

When his head fell to the floor, his eyes were as black as the shoes he had been polishing. I have not the faintest idea what his crimes were, nor do I care. I care only that there is one less vampire today than there was yesterday. It is strange, I admit, to think that I owe this fact to a vampire. However, it has long been said that "my enemy's enemy is my friend."

Fifteen more letters arrived in Little Pigeon Creek over the next three years, each with nothing more than a name, a place, and that unmistakable H.

There were times that two would arrive in as many months. There were times that none arrived for three months' time. Regardless of when they came, I always set out as soon as my work would allow. Each hunt brought new lessons. New improvements to my skills and tools. Some were as effortless as the beheading of Silas Williams. Others saw me lying in wait for hours on end or posing as prey—only to turn the tables when the vampire attacked. Some required a day's ride or less. Others took me as far as Fort Wayne and Nashville.

FIG. 12 - ABE STANDS AMONG HIS VAMPIRE VICTIMS IN A PAINTING TITLED 'THE YOUNG HUNTER' BY DIEGO SWANSON (OIL ON CANVAS, 1913).

No matter how long the journey, he always carried the same items with him.

In my bundle I carried whatever food I could, a pan for frying pork, and a pot for boiling water. These were wrapped in

my long coat, which I had paid a seamstress to further alter by removing the inside pockets and sewing a thick leather lining in their place. The whole was tied to the handle of my ax, which I kept sharp enough to shave my whiskers. I added a crossbow to this little arsenal, too, one that I had fashioned myself using the drawings in a borrowed copy of Weapons of the Taborites as my guide. I continued to practice with it when time allowed, but dared not wield it in battle until my skills were much improved.

While hunting vampires offered a surplus of vengeance, it paid nothing in the way of real money. As a young man, Abe was expected to help provide for his family. And in keeping with customs of the time, any wages he earned belonged to his father until his twenty-first birthday. As one might imagine, this didn't sit well.

The idea of handing my earnings to such a man! Of my labor rewarding his lack thereof. Of doing anything to benefit one so shiftless. So selfish and cowardly! It is no more than indentured servitude!

Abe was always looking for a job, whether clearing trees, hauling grain, or ferrying passengers from the banks of the Ohio to waiting steamboats on a scow of his own construction. * In early May 1828, when Abe was still reeling from his sister's death, a job came looking for him for a change. One that would change his life.

James Gentry owned one of the largest and most prosperous farms around Little Pigeon Creek. He'd been an acquaintance of Thomas Lincoln for the better part of ten years and was unlike him in just about every imaginable way. Naturally, Abe had always looked up to him on account of this. For his part, Gentry had come to admire the tall, hardworking, and modest Lincoln boy. His own son Allen was a few years older than Abe, but a pinch less mature. The industrious farmer wanted to expand his reach (and his profits) by selling his corn and bacon downriver in Mississippi, where sugar and cotton were king, but where other goods were in great demand.

Mr. Gentry asked if I would join Allen in building and piloting a flatboat of his goods downriver—stopping in Mississippi and points south to sell quantities of corn, pork, and other sundries. For this he would pay me the sum of eight dollars each month, and purchase my steamboat ticket home from New Orleans.

It's likely Abe would have accepted this job even if there'd been no promise of money. It was a chance to escape. A chance for adventure.

He put his ax (and in fairness, the carpentry skills he'd learned from his father) to work building a sturdy, forty-foot flatboat from green oak, cutting each plank and fastening it to his frame with wooden pegs. He built a shelter in the middle of the deck, which he made big enough so that he could stand inside without fear of hitting his head on the ceiling. Inside were two beds, a small stove, and a lantern as well as four small windows that could be shut "in the event of attack." Finally he coated the seams with pitch * and fashioned a steering oar. **

At the risk of sounding proud, I must say that she turned out rather well considering that she was the first I had ever built. Even when we burdened her with ten tons of goods, she drew less than two feet of water.

Allen and Abe launched their fully loaded flatboat on May 23rd. It was to be a journey of more than a thousand miles. For Abe, it was to be his first glimpse of the Deep South.

We battled winds and currents, and kept an ever-vigilant eye on the river ahead. On many occasions, we were forced to free our modest vessel from mud or brush after running aground on a bank. We filled our bellies with the endless reserves of corn and pork on board, and washed our clothes in the ever-present Mississippi when they grew offensive. For weeks this continued. Sometimes we covered as many as sixty miles in a day, sometimes thirty or less.

The young men would holler with excitement when they crossed paths with a steamboat, those miraculous, gleaming stern-wheelers puffing and splashing their way against the current. Their excitement would build at the sight of distant smoke rising from the river ahead, then crescendo as they approached and passed, shouting greetings and waving to passengers, pilots, and clerks.

The noise of engines and churning water. Black smoke rising from its chimney and white steam from its pipes. A boat that could take a man all the way from New Orleans to Louisville in under twenty-five days. Were there any limits to the ingenuity of man?

This excitement having quieted, they would float for miles with nary a sound.

It was a sort of peace I have rarely enjoyed since. As if we were the only two souls on earth—all of nature ours to enjoy. I wondered why a creator who had dreamt such beauty would have slandered it with such evil. Such grief. Why He had not been content to leave it unspoilt. I still wonder.

When the sun dipped out of sight, Allen and Abe would start

looking for a suitable place to anchor—a town, if possible. One night, not long after they'd passed through Baton Rouge, Lincoln and Gentry tied up on the Duchesne Plantation, securing the flatboat to a tree with rope. As was their routine, the young men fried their supper, checked to see if the ropes were secure, and adjourned to their shelter. Here they would read or talk until their eyes grew weary, snuff their lantern, and sleep in perfect darkness.

I woke with a start and reached for the club that I kept near. Springing to my feet, I saw the trace of two figures in the doorway. I daresay they were a good deal surprised at my height—and a good deal more surprised by the ferocity with which I bludgeoned them about the head. I chased them (bludgeoning my own head on a crossbeam as I did) out onto the deck, where the moon revealed them in full. They were Negroes—seven in all. The other five were busily trying to untie our boat. "Off with you devils!" I cried, "before I brain the lot of you!" To make them know my sincerity, I cracked another across his ribs, and raised my club to crack another. This proved unnecessary. The Negroes fled. As they did, I chanced to see a broken pair of leg irons around one of their ankles, and knew the truth at once. These were no common thieves. They were slaves. Likely escaped from this very plantation and looking to throw off the scent of the dogs by making off with our boat.

Gentry was roused by the commotion and helped Abe chase the remaining slaves into the woods. Satisfied they wouldn't return for the moment, they cut the flatboat loose and took their chances navigating the Mississippi at night.

We set out, Allen holding our lantern at the bow and squinting into the night, me working the steering oar from atop our shelter, trying to keep us dead down the middle. I could not help but steal a look back at the bank, and as I did, I saw a white figure running toward the river from the plantation. Here was the first of the overseers come to reclaim his slaves. But this man, this tiny white figure, did not stop running at the river's edge. He jumped to the opposite bank in one long, impossible leap. They did not run from men or dogs.

They ran from a vampire.

I thought briefly of steering us into the muddy bank. Of taking the bundle from under my bed and giving chase. I cannot say whether I thought the attempt hopeless, or the victims worthless. I can say only that I did not stop. Allen (it now dawning on him how perilously close he had come to having his throat cut) presently let forth a stream of profanity the likes of

which I had never heard, and much of which I did not understand. Cursing himself for failing to bring a musket along. Condemning “those murderous sons of bitches.” I remained silent —focused only on keeping us dead down the middle. I could not bring myself to hate our attackers, for it occurred to me that they were merely trying to preserve their lives. In doing so, they had thought it necessary to deprive me of mine. Allen went on. Something about “no-good black” something or others.

“Judge them not equally,” I said.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

II

Allen and Abe reached New Orleans at midday on June 20th, twisting round the ever-tightening bends of the Mississippi as they neared its center, where they would be able to sell their remaining goods (and sell their boat for lumber) at any number of busy wharves. A light rain greeted them, welcome relief from the oppressive humidity that had dogged so much of their trip downriver.

The north of the city presented itself first—sprawling and lively. Farms became houses. Houses became streets. Streets became two-story brick buildings with iron railings on their balconies. So many sailing ships! So many steamboats! Flatboats numbering in the hundreds, all clamoring for their little piece of the great river.

New Orleans was a city of 40,000, and the South's gateway to the world. Walking along its wharves, one was likely to encounter sailors from every corner of Europe and South America —even some from the Orient.

We could not be rid of our cargo quickly enough. How we longed to explore this city of endless wonders! I was all astonishment, for I had never in my life seen such multitudes—their tongues dripping with French and Spanish phrases. Ladies fanning themselves in the latest fashions, and gentlemen clad from head to toe in suits of the highest quality. Streets filled with horses and carts; merchants selling every ware imagined. We strolled the rue de Chartres; beheld the Basilica of St. Louis in Jackson Square, so named for our president's heroic defense of the city. Here, teams of men and mules dug trenches for gas pipes. When their months of work were finished, one of them proudly sang, the city would "gleam like a sparkling jewel in the night, with nary a torch or a candle in sight."

Abe was struck by the liveliness of the city and its people. He was also struck by the age of the things around him.

I imagined myself conveyed to those places in Europe that I had so often read about. Here, for the first time in my life, were homes with ivy-covered walls. Here were men of letters. Architecture and art. Here were vast libraries filled with eager students and appreciative patrons. Here were all the things that

my father would never understand.

Marie Laveau's boardinghouse on St. Claude Street was hardly the most impressive of the city's Spanish-style buildings, but it was good enough for a pair of Indiana flatboatmen to rest their heads for a week.

There was a saloon not far from Mrs. Laveau's where one could have his fill of rum or wine or whiskey. Flush with money from selling our goods and our boat, and flush with the excitement of being in such a city for the first time, I admit we indulged in these—more even than a pair of young, foolish men should have. The saloon was overfilled with sailors from all parts of the world. Flatboatmen from every point on the Mississippi, Ohio, and Sangamon. A brawl seemed to break out every third minute. It is a wonder they did not break out more frequently.

Surly boatmen weren't the only strange characters Abe encountered during his first twenty-four hours in New Orleans. The following morning, as he and Allen stumbled through the streets in search of an inoffensive breakfast—clutching their aching heads and shielding their eyes from the sun—Abe spotted something incredible coming toward them on Bienville Street.

… a coach of lustrous white, pulled by a pair of white horses, and driven by a boy wearing a coat of the same color. Behind him sat a pair of gentlemen: one cherubic and red-cheeked, his suit an unremarkable blend of greens and grays. The other wore a suit of white silk, a complement to his fair skin and long white hair. His eyes hidden behind dark glasses. He was as obvious a vampire as I had ever laid eyes upon, and by all appearances, the wealthiest. Elegant and refined. Unencumbered by shadows. Free to mingle as he pleased. And laughing. He and the living gentleman were in the midst of what looked a very cheerful conversation. I could think only of staking him through the heart as his coach neared. Of chopping off his head. How the blood would look against the white silk of his coat! Alas, I could only watch him—restrained by the absence of weapons and the presence of an aching head. The white-haired vampire gave me a knowing look as he passed. And then the strangest feeling… the feeling of invading eyes reading the pages of my journal. The sound of a voice with no source…

Judge us not equally, Abraham.

They turned onto Dauphine Street and were gone. But the feeling of invading eyes remained. This time the source was plain as day. I spotted a pale little fellow across the street, half hidden in an alley, his eyes unquestionably fixed on me. He was dressed entirely in black, with a mess of hair to match, and a small mustache beneath his dark glasses. Unmistakably a vampire.

Seeing that he had been discovered, the figure turned and disappeared into the alley. This I could not leave uninvestigated! Aching head be damned! I left my friend to his own stumbling and hastened after the stranger—chasing him down the alley to Conti Street, then across Basin Street, where the devil sought refuge behind the cemetery * walls. I had been no more than ten paces behind him, but on reaching the gates I perceived him not. He had vanished. Lost in a maze of crypts. I wondered if he had simply slipped into one of them; wondered how many vampires were—

"And what mean you by chasing me so, sir?"

I spun around and raised my fists. He was behind me—his back against the inside of the cemetery wall, clever devil. Staring at me, his dark glasses in his fingers. His tired eyes and high forehead.

" 'Chasing' you, sir?" I said. "What meant you by running?"

"Well, sir, the manner in which you shielded your eyes from the light… the familiar glance you shared with the gentleman in the coach… I thought you a vampire."

I could scarcely believe what I had heard.

"You thought me a vampire?" he asked. "But I…"

A smile grew over the little man's lips. He looked at the dark glasses in his fingers; at the look on this tall stranger's face. He began to laugh.

"I believe us both guilty of grave misjudgments."

"Forgive me, sir, but… am I to understand that you are not a vampire?"

"Regrettably, no," he said, laughing, "or I should still have my breath."

I offered my apology and extended my hand. "Abe Lincoln." The little man took it.

"Edgar Poe."

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

III

Abraham Lincoln and Edgar Allan Poe were born within weeks of each other. Both lost their mothers as children. Otherwise, their upbringings couldn't have been more different.

After his mother's death, Poe had been taken in by a wealthy merchant, John Allan (who dealt in slaves, among other commodities). Whisked away from his native Boston, he'd been thoroughly educated in some of England's finest schools. He'd seen the wonders of Europe that Abe could only read about in books. Around the time Abe swore his vengeance against vampires and staked Jack Barts through the heart, Edgar Allan Poe returned to America, settling with his adoptive father in Virginia and enjoying all the luxuries associated with belonging to one of its wealthiest families. Poe had everything Abe could ever want: The finest education. The finest homes. More books than he could count. A father with no want of ambition.

But he and Abe were equally miserable creatures.

As a first-year student at the University of Virginia, Poe drank and gambled away every penny his foster father sent him, until John Allan finally cut him off. Enraged and abandoned, he fled Virginia for Boston and enlisted in the army under the name Edgar A. Perry, loading artillery shells by day, and writing ever-darker stories and poems by candlelight. It was here, while stationed in the city of his birth, that Edgar Allan Poe met his first vampire.

Using his own money, Poe published a short collection of poems, identifying himself only as "A Bostonian" on its cover (for fear of being mocked by his fellow enlisted men). Of the fifty he paid to have printed, fewer than twenty sold. Notwithstanding this poor reception, one reader saw a particular genius in Poe's collection, and bribed its printer to learn the author's true identity. "It was shortly [after this] that I was visited upon by a Mr. Guy de Vere—a widower of considerable means. He explained how he had come to learn my name, and that he had been much affected by my work. He then demanded to know what a vampire was doing serving in the army."

Guy de Vere was convinced that only a vampire could have written poems with such an outlook on death and grief. Poems of

such darkness and beauty.

"He was surprised, then, to find a living man their creator. I was likewise surprised to find myself speaking to a man who was no longer living."

Poe was endlessly fascinated by the stately, bloodsucking de Vere, and de Vere by the gloomy, brilliant Poe. The two struck up a tenuous friendship, much as Henry and Abe had done. But Poe wasn't interested in learning about vampires to better hunt them —he wanted to know about the experience of living in darkness, of moving beyond death, so that he could better write about it. De Vere was all too happy to oblige (with the understanding that Poe would never reveal his identity in print). *

Several months after making de Vere's acquaintance, Poe's regiment was assigned to Fort Moultrie in South Carolina. With no city to satisfy his appetite for culture, and no means of satisfying his thirst for further vampire knowledge, the army suddenly seemed a prison.

Therefore he had decided to grant himself an "unofficial leave" and come to New Orleans for the stated purpose of "studying vampires"—for de Vere had insisted there was "not a better place in America to do so." Judging by the number of times he filled and emptied his whiskey glass, he had also come to drink himself to death. We sat that evening in the saloon near Mrs. Laveau's. Allen Gentry had gone off to "consort with ladies of a certain character," leaving us free to talk on that subject we enjoyed most, but dared not discuss freely. We spoke well into the night, sharing everything we had read, and heard, and witnessed firsthand regarding vampires.

"How then do they learn to feed?" asked Abe as the barkeep swept the empty tavern around them. "How do they know to shy away from the su—"

"How does a calf know to stand? A honeybee to… to build a hive?"

Poe took another drink.

"It is their nature, beautiful and simple. That you would destroy such beings, Mr. Lincoln, such superior creatures, seems madness to me."

"That you speak of them with such reverence, Mr. Poe, seems madness to me."

"Can you imagine it? Can you imagine seeing the universe through such eyes? Laughing in the face of time and death—the world your Garden of Eden? Your library? Your harem?"

"Yes. I can also imagine a want of companionship, and a want of peace."

“Well, I can imagine a want of nothing! Think of the fortune one could amass, the comforts one could afford, the wonders of the world one could see at his leisure!”

“And when this intoxication has worn away… when every desire is fulfilled and every language learned—when there are no more distant cities to explore; no classics to be studied; not another coin to be stuffed into one’s coffers—what then? One can have all the comforts of the world, but what use are they if there is no comfort in them?”

Abe shared a folktale, one that he had first heard from a traveler on the Old Cumberland Road.

There was once a man who yearned to live forever. Beginning in his youth, he prayed for God to grant him immortality. He was charitable and earnest, honest in his business dealings, true to his wife, and kind to his children. He humbled himself before God, and preached His laws to all who would listen. And yet, he continued to age with every passing year, until he finally died a frail old man. When he reached heaven, he asked, “Lord, why did You refuse to answer my prayer? Did I not live my life according to Your word? Did I not praise Your name to all who would listen?” To which God replied, “You did all of these things. And that is why I did not curse you by answering your prayer.”

“You speak of eternal life. You speak of indulging the mind and body,” said Abe. “But what of the soul?”

“And what use is a soul to a creature that shall never die?”

Abe couldn’t help but smile. Here was a strange little man with a strange way of seeing things. Only the second living man he’d ever met who knew the truth of vampires. He drank to excess and spoke in an irritating, high-pitched voice. It was hard not to like him.

“I begin to suspect,” said Abe, “that you would like to be one of them.”

Poe laughed at the suggestion. “Is not our existence long and miserable enough?” he asked, laughing. “Who in God’s name would seek to prolong it?”

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

IV

On the following afternoon, June 22nd, Abe wandered along St. Philip Street by himself. Allen Gentry hadn't returned from whatever depravities he'd enjoyed the night before, and Poe had staggered off to his own boardinghouse at dawn. After sleeping half the day away, Abe had decided that some fresh air and a stroll were desperately needed to chase the fog from his mind and bitter taste from his mouth.

I happened upon some great commotion in the street as I neared the river—a large crowd gathered around a platform, which had been decorated in reds and whites and blues. A yellow banner flew above this makeshift stage, upon which were the words SLAVE AUCTION TODAY! ONE O'CLOCK! More than a hundred men were crowded in front of the platform. More than twice that number of Negroes milled about nearby. Pipe smoke choked the air as prospective buyers mingled—the rare laugh breaking through the din, their pencils and papers held ready as the hour neared. The auctioneer, a man every ounce as plump and pink as a hog, then stepped before them and began: "Honored gentlemen, I am pleased to present the day's first lot." Upon this, the first Negro, a man of perhaps five-and-thirty years, took the stage and bowed heartily, smiling and standing tall in his ill-fitting suit (which looked to have been purchased for the occasion). "A bull, name of Cuff! Still in the prime of his strength! As fine a field hand as you are ever likely to see, and sure to sire a brood of sons with backs every bit as sound!" That this "bull" seemed so fervent in his hope of being bought—standing up straight, smiling and bowing as the auctioneer described his many uses—I could not help my pity and revulsion. The rest of this man's life… all the future generations of his progeny. All of it rested on this moment. All of it in the hands of a man he had never met. A man willing to pay the highest price.

All told, there were more than two-hundred slaves scheduled to be auctioned over a two-day period. For a week leading up to the sale, they'd been held in a pair of barns, where prospective buyers had been free to come and inspect them.

This inspection involved all manner of invasion and humiliation. Men, women, and children, ages three years to five-

and-seventy, were made to stand bare before strangers. Their muscles were pulled at; their mouths pried open and their teeth inspected. They were made to walk and bend and lift, lest they be concealing any lameness. They were made to list their talents. To assist in driving up their own price.

This ran counter to their own interests, for the higher the price, * the less likely they would ever be able to save enough money to buy their freedom from the kind masters who allowed them to do so.

The theater of it all! Men and women! Children and infants presented to this surly mob—this collection of so-called gentlemen! I saw a Negro girl of three or four clinging to her mother, confused as to why she was dressed in such clothes; why she had been scrubbed the night before; made to stand on this platform while men shouted numbers and waved pieces of paper in the air. Again I wondered why a Creator who had dreamt such beauty would have slandered it with such evil.

If Lincoln saw any irony in the fact that he had come downriver to sell goods to many of these same plantation owners, he never wrote of it.

“Gentlemen, I now ask your attention be turned to a fine specimen of family if ever there was! The bull by name of Israel—his teeth of the regular sort, and his build uncommonly large. You shall not find a better planter of rice in this or any parish! His wife, Beatrice—with arms and back almost as strong as that of a man’s, yet hands delicate enough to mend a lady’s dress! Their children—a boy of ten or eleven years, fated to become as strong a worker as his father, and a girl of four, her face as sweet as an angel’s. You shall never find four better specimens!”

Each slave followed his own sale with keen interest, his eyes darting around as each bid was shouted out. If he was purchased by a master with a reputation for kindness, or one who had purchased some of his near relations, he would leave the stage with something like contentment—even joy on his face. But if he was sold to a man who seemed especially cruel, or knew that he would never see his loved ones again, the quiet anguish on his face was indescribable.

One buyer in particular drew my interest—a man whose pocketbook seemed bottomless, and whose purchases seemed senseless. He arrived at the auction after it had begun (this alone was unusual) and snapped up a dozen slaves, with seemingly no regard for their sex, or health, or skills. In fact, he seemed interested only in those Negroes described as “bargains.” But his purchases were only part of the reason he drew my suspicion. He

was a slender man in a fine waist-length coat—shorter than I (though still quite tall), with a graying beard meant to conceal the scar that ran the length of his face, from his left eye, across his lips, to his chin. He held a parasol to shade himself from the sun, and wore dark glasses over his eyes. If he was not a vampire, he certainly admired their fashion. What was the meaning of it? Why had he purchased two older women of similar abilities? A boy with a lame leg? Why did he need so many slaves at all?

I resolved to follow him and find the answer.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

V

Twelve slaves walked barefoot, winding their way north on a muddy road that traced the Mississippi. They were male and female, ranging from fourteen to sixty-six years of age. Some had known each other their whole lives. Some had met only an hour or two before. Each of the twelve had a rope around their waist connecting them to the others. In front of this convoy, their new gray-bearded master; behind it, a white overseer, his rifle ready to cut down any slave who dared to run. Both men rode comfortably on horseback. Abe was careful to keep his distance as they wound their way through the woods.

I walked a quarter of a mile behind the group. Close enough to hear the overseer's occasional barking, but far enough for my careful footfalls to escape the ears of a vampire.

Night had begun to fall by the time they reached a plantation eight miles north of the city, and a mile from the east bank of the river.

It looked no different than any of the plantations I had seen up and down the Mississippi. A blacksmith's shop. A tanning yard. A grist mill. Storehouses, machinery, looms, sheds, stables, and some five-and-twenty slave quarters surrounding the planter's house. These were one-room cabins where a dozen Negroes might live together, sleeping on dirt floors or corn husk beds, their pine torches burning so the women could tend to their quilting work long into the night. By day the dark fields around me would be filled with noise and work. Gangs of a hundred men digging trenches in long rows. Women driving plows in the searing heat. The white overseers riding among them on horseback, looking for the slightest offense to punish by flogging their naked backs. In the center of it all stood the master's house. Those slaves "fortunate" enough to work here were spared the backbreaking toil of the fields, but by no means was theirs an easy existence, for they were just as likely to be flogged for the slightest transgression. Furthermore, female slaves of any age might well find themselves at the mercy of master's unspeakable whims.

Abe kept his distance as the twelve slaves were led past the maison principale and into a large barn, the inside lit by torches and hanging oil lamps. Hiding behind a shed some twenty yards

away, he had a clear view through the open doors.

Here they were joined by a large Negro (the master and overseer having adjourned to the house). He held a whip, which he cracked at the new arrivals while ordering them to form a line in the center of the barn. Thus arranged, they were made to sit—still joined at the waist by rope. A mulatto woman presently appeared carrying a large basket under her arm (this only serving to increase the apprehension of the newly arrived, for they had doubtless heard stories of slaves being branded by new masters). Happily, the basket was stuffed with food, to which the twelve slaves were instructed to help themselves freely. I watched their eyes shine at the sight of fried pork and corn cakes. Of cow's milk and handfuls of sugar candies. I saw such relief on their faces, for until this moment, they had been unsure of what cruelties awaited. They could hardly fill their starving bellies fast enough.

Abe wondered if he had been too hasty in his suspicion. Henry proved that there were vampires capable of kindness. Of restraint. Had these slaves been bought for the purpose of being freed? At the very least, would they be treated with compassion?

This feast having gone on for what seemed a half hour, I watched a party of white men walk from the house to the barn. There were ten in all, including the master I had followed from New Orleans. Each varied in age and build—though all looked to be men of some means. On their reaching the barn, the large Negro again cracked his whip and ordered the slaves to their feet, and set about removing the rope from around their waists. The mulatto woman collected her basket and made off with no want of haste.

The white men having assembled near the entrance, one of them handed something to his host (certainly papers of some sort—I suspect they were banknotes) and approached the line of slaves. I watched him pace back and forth, examining each one, until at last he stopped behind an older, thickset woman and waited. One by one, each of the eight others handed his tribute to their host, examined the remaining slaves, and picked his own to wait behind, until all nine guests were in place. The Negroes dared not turn around. Their eyes remained fixed on the ground at their feet. Nine of the slaves now being spoken for, the large Negro led the other three out of the barn and into the dark. What became of these poor souls, I cannot say. I can only speak to the anxiety I felt as they disappeared—for something was about to happen. What it was, I knew not. I knew only that it would be dreadful.

He was correct. Satisfied that the other slaves were out of

earshot, the gray-bearded host gave a whistle. Upon this, nine pairs of eyes turned black, nine sets of fangs descended, and nine vampires tore into their helpless prey from behind.

The first vampire grabbed the sides of the thickset woman's head and twisted it backward so that her chin and spine met—his wretched face her dying sight. Another screamed and writhed when she felt the sting of two fangs in her shoulder. But the greater her struggle, the deeper the wound became, and the more freely her precious blood poured into the creature's mouth. I saw the head of a boy beaten until his brains poured from a hole in his skull, and another man's head taken entirely. I could do nothing to help them. Not when there were so many. Not without a weapon. The slave master calmly pulled the barn doors closed to stifle the noises of death, and I ran into the night, my face wet with tears. Disgusted with myself for being so helpless. Sickened by what I had seen. But more than anything—sickened by the truth taking shape in my mind. A truth that I had been too blind to see before.

Abe purchased a black leather-bound journal on Dauphine Street the next day. His first entry, while a scant seventeen words, was a powerful statement of that truth, and one of the most important sentences he would ever write.

June 25th, 1828

So long as this country is cursed with slavery, so too will it be cursed with vampires.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

PART II

VAMPIRE HUNTER

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

FIVE

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

New Salem

The way for a young man to rise, is to improve himself every way he can, never suspecting that any body wishes to hinder him.

—Abraham Lincoln, in a letter to William Herndon
July 10th, 1848

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

I

Abe was shaking.

It was a bitter cold February night, and he'd been waiting for a man to put his clothes on for the better part of two hours. Abe paced back and forth… back and forth in the hard-packed snow, throwing the occasional glance toward the unfinished courthouse on the other side of the square, and at the second floor of the saloon across the street—where a light still burned behind the curtained window of a whore. He passed the time with thoughts of his weeks spent floating shirtless down the Mississippi in unbearable heat. "Heat a man could drown in." He thought of mornings spent splitting rails in the shade; afternoons cooling off with a swim in the creek. But those memories were all more than three years and two hundred miles away. Tonight, on his twenty-second birthday, he was freezing on the empty streets of Calhoun, Illinois. *

Thomas Lincoln had finally given up on Indiana. He'd been receiving regular reports from John Hanks, a cousin of Abe's mother, regarding the untapped wonders of Illinois.

John wrote of the "plentiful and fertile" prairies of that state. Of "flat land that needed no clearing. Free of rocks, and to be had cheap." It was all the incentive Thomas needed to leave Indiana and its bitter memories behind.

In March of 1830, the Lincolns packed their belongings into three wagons, each hitched to a team of oxen, and left Little Pigeon Creek forever. For fifteen exhausting days they navigated mud-covered roads and forded icy rivers, "until at last we reached Macon County and settled just west of Decatur," smack-dab in the center of Illinois. Abe was twenty-one then. It'd been two years since he'd witnessed the slave massacre in New Orleans. Two years of handing hard-earned wages over to his father. Now he was finally free to strike out on his own. Despite being desperate to do so, Abe stayed on an extra year, helping his father build a new cabin and helping his family settle into their new home.

But tonight he was twenty-two. And so help him, it was to be his last birthday under his father's roof.

[My stepbrother] John was the one who insisted we ride to Calhoun to celebrate. I wouldn't hear of it at first, not being one

to make a fuss over the occasion. As usual, he nagged at me until I could tolerate no more. He stated his intentions while on our ride to town, which as I recall was amounting to "getting blind stinking drunk and buying you the company of a woman friend." He knew of a saloon on Sixth Street. I do not recall the name, or whether it had one at all. I remember only that it had a second floor where a man could indulge himself for a price. John's intentions nonwithstanding [sic], I can say that my conscience remains clear in this regard.

Lincoln may have resisted the temptations of the saloon's perfumed ladies, but he drank its whiskey freely. He and John shared laughs at the expense of their father; their sisters; at each other. It was all "very good for the soul, and a very good way to spend one's birthday." Once again, John's nagging had paid off. Near the end of the evening, however, while his stepbrother flirted with a voluptuous brunette by the name of Missy ("like the Mississippi, honey, but twice as deep, and a helluva lot warmer"), Abe saw an average-size man walk in, wearing clothes "hardly fit for a night so cold."

His face bore none of the redness I had observed on the other customers as they hurried into the light and warmth of the saloon —nor had his breath been visible against the cold air as he entered. He was a pale gentleman of thirty years or less, but his hair was nonetheless a curled mix of brown and gray, the result being something like the color of weathered planks. He made straight for the barkeep (it was clear the two were acquainted) and whispered something to him, upon which the aproned little man hurried up the staircase. He was a vampire. He had to be— whiskey be damned. But how to know with certainty?

Abe was suddenly struck by an idea.

I barely spoke above a whisper. "Do you see that man at the bar?" I asked John, who had been occupied with the lady's ear. "Tell me, can you ever recall seeing a man with such a repulsive face?" John—who had not the slightest idea what the man's face looked like—laughed heartily all the same (such was his state). Upon my whispering this, the pale gentleman spun around and glared directly at me. I smiled back and lifted my glass to him. No other creature would have heard the insult over such a din, or across such a distance! There could be no doubt! Yet I could not take him. Not here. Not with so many people watching. I smiled at the thought of being dragged away and charged with murder. What would be my defense? That my victim had been a vampire? What's more, my coat and weapons remained outside in my saddle bag. No—this would not do. There must be another way.

The barkeep returned with three women in tow and arranged them in front of the vampire's table.

Having picked two of these, the vampire followed them up the staircase, and the barkeep rang out his last call.

Abe's mind, half pickled with whiskey, churned until it received "the blessings of another idea." Knowing that his brother would never leave him to wander the streets alone, he told John that he'd changed his mind and made "arrangements" to spend the night with a woman.

John had hoped (fervently, I suspect) that this would be the case, and promptly made his own arrangements. We bade each other good night as the barkeep snuffed out the lanterns and locked the bottles away. Having given my brother and his friend ample time to reach their room, I followed up the stairs, alone. Here was a single, narrow hallway lit dimly by oil light and papered with an elaborate pattern of reds and pinks. A number of doors ran down both sides, all of them closed. At the end, another closed door faced me which, judging by the shape of the building, led outside to a back staircase. I walked slowly down the center, listening for clues as to which room held my vampire. Laughter from my left. Profanity from my right. Sounds which I have not the words to describe. Having reached the end of the hallway with no success, I at last heard what I had been waiting for on my right side—the voices of two women coming from the same room. Leaving John to enjoy the warm embrace of a stranger, I turned back, headed out into the cold, and donned my long coat. I knew the vampire would likely finish his business and leave before sunrise. And when he did, I would be waiting for him.

But by the second hour of pacing in the street, he'd grown tired, cold, and bored.

The slaughter of sixteen vampires had left me rather audacious, I admit. Not content to wait any longer in the cold, I resolved to be done with it. I walked up the snow-covered staircase at the rear of the building, taking care to step lightly, and preparing the martyr in my hand.

"Martyr" was the name Abe had given to a new weapon of his own creation. From an earlier entry in his journal:

I have recently read of the successes of an English chemist by the name of Walker who has developed a method of creating flame using nothing more than friction. Having procured the necessary chemicals to reproduce his "congreves," * I set about dipping a number of small sticks in this mixture. The chemicals having dried, I bundled twenty of the little sticks tightly together (the whole being roughly twice the thickness of a fountain pen)

and soaked all but the tip of one end in glue. When the exposed end is struck against a rough surface, the resulting flame is brief, violent, and brighter than the sun. This has the effect of rendering my black-eyed adversaries temporarily blind, allowing me to chop them to pieces with greater ease. I have used them twice with tremendous success (though the burns on my fingers bear witness to earlier failures).

I stood before the door in question with the martyr in one hand and my ax in the other, light from beneath the door illuminating my snow-covered shoes. There were no voices coming from the other side, and I was presently struck by the thought of seeing the two girls slaughtered on the bed, their blood staining the sheets to match the patterned walls. Using the head of the ax, I knocked three times.

Nothing.

Having given them ample time to answer, I knocked again. Another moment passed with no noise from the other side. Just as I was weighing whether to knock again or not, I heard the creaking of the bed, followed by the creaking of someone walking across the wooden floor. I prepared to strike. The door opened.

It was him. Curly hair, the color of weathered wood. Nothing but a long shirt between his skin and the cold.

"What in the hell is it?" he asked.

Abe struck the tip of the martyr against the wall.

Nothing.

The damned thing failed to light, it having been left in the damp pocket of my coat for so long. The vampire looked at me quizzically. His fangs did not descend, nor his eyes blacken. But on seeing the ax in my other hand, they doubled in width, and he shut the door with such force as to rattle the whole building. I stood there, looking at the door like a dog looks at a book, all the while allowing the vampire time to escape on the other side. This having occurred to me at last, I took a step back and let the door have the full force of my heel. It sailed open with a tremendous noise—a noise I mistakenley [sic] attributed to the splintering of wood. I did not recognize it as a gunshot until after the lead ball had passed my head, missing it by no more than an inch and burrowing into the wall behind me. I will admit that I was a good deal shaken by this. So much so that on seeing him drop the pistol and climb out the window headfirst (his naked backside bidding me farewell) my first thought was not to pursue, but to examine my head lest I be bleeding to death. Satisfied this was not the case, I hurried into the room after him—the two ladies quite undressed and screaming in the bed next to me. I could hear

doors opening down the length of the hallway as curious customers stepped out to investigate the commotion. On reaching the window, I saw my prey pick himself off the snowy street below and run barefoot into the night, slipping and landing on his bare hide at least twice before he escaped my view, screaming for help.

This was no vampire.

I cursed aloud most of the ride home. Never in my life had I been so embarrassed or made such a drunken error. Never had I felt like such a fool. If there was one comforting prospect, it was this: soon I would finally be free.

The winter of 1831 was an especially harsh one, but with March came the thaw, and with it the first birds in the sky and blades of grass on the earth. For Abe, the March thaw brought an end to twenty-two years with Thomas Lincoln. Years that had grown increasingly cold. It's unlikely that they parted with anything more than a handshake, if that. Abe had only this to write on the day he left home for good.

Off to Beardstown by way of Springfield. John, John, and I hope to make the trip in three days.

Lincoln rode west with his stepbrother John and cousin John Hanks. The three young men had been hired by an acquaintance named Denton Offutt to build a flatboat and ferry goods down the Sangamon River to New Orleans, a round trip of about three months.

Offutt was remembered by at least one contemporary as "a hot-tempered, strict, noisy son of a bitch." But like most people who encountered Abe Lincoln, he'd been impressed by the young man's hard work, intelligence, and general disposition. On reaching Beardstown (in three days, as they'd hoped), Abe led his team in building the flatboat and loading it with Offutt's cargo.

My second flatboat was twice as long and much improved from the first, and built with a great deal more speed—for not only did I have the experience of having done it once before, but I was gifted with additional hands to share the work. We were off about three weeks after we arrived, much to Mr. Offutt's surprise and satisfaction.

The Sangamon River twisted through 250 miles of Central Illinois. It was a far cry from the "mighty Mississip"—more of a stream or a creek in some places than a river, and burdened with low-hanging branches and countless pieces of driftwood, each one at the mercy of the current. This troubled body wound its way down to the more forgiving Illinois River before reaching the Mississippi.

The quartet of flatboatmen (Offutt having elected to go along for the ride) had a terrible time getting down the Sangamon. Each day brought a new disaster—running aground; coming upon a fallen tree in the river. Legend holds that their flatboat became wedged on a dam near New Salem, Illinois, and began taking on water. As locals gathered on the shore, offering advice and laughing at the young men scrambling to save their vessel, Lincoln was again struck by one of his ideas. He bored a hole in the front of the boat (which hung over the dam) and let all the water run out of it. This raised the back of the boat enough to safely float it over. With the hole plugged, the men were on their way, and the people of New Salem were mightily impressed. Denton Offutt had been impressed, too—not so much by Abe's ingenuity, but by the booming little settlement of New Salem.

Regardless of the river and its obstacles, Abe managed to find something of that elusive peace again during the trip. He took the time to record drawings, lengthy remembrances, and random thoughts in his journal nearly every night after they'd tied up. In an entry dated May 4th, he begins to expand on his one-sentence statement of the connection between slavery and vampires.

Not long after the first ships landed in this New World, I believe that vampires reached a tacit understanding with slave owners. I believe that this nation holds some special attraction for them because here, in America, they can feed on human blood without fear of discovery or reprisal. Without the inconvenience of living in darkness. I believe that this is especially true in the South, where those flamboyant gentlemen vampires have worked out a way to "grow" their prey. Where the strongest slaves are put to work growing tobacco and food for the fortunate and free, and the lesser are themselves harvested and eaten. I believe this, but I cannot yet prove it to be true.

Abe had written Henry about what he'd seen (and asking what it meant) after his first trip to New Orleans. He'd received no reply. With his departure from Little Pigeon Creek imminent, he'd decided to venture back to the false cabin and check in on his undead friend.

I found the place deserted. The furnishings and bed were gone, leaving the cabin nothing more than an empty room. On opening the door in the back, I found not a staircase leading down to the rooms below, but smooth, hard-packed dirt. Had the whole of Henry's hiding place been filled in? Or had the whole been dreamed by me in my delusional state?

Abe didn't stay in Indiana long enough to find out. He wrote something in his journal, tore out the page, and hung it on a nail

over Henry's fireplace.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN
WEST OF DECATUR, ILLINOIS
CARE OF MR. JOHN HANKS

New Orleans held little of the wonder it had the first time around, and Abe found himself eager to conclude their business and catch a steamer north. He stayed on for a few days to give his stepbrother and cousin a chance to explore, but barely ventured out, not wishing to happen upon another slave auction or wayward vampire. He did, however, stop by the saloon near Mrs. Laveau's—not to drink, but to indulge the slim hope that he might run into his old friend Poe. It wasn't to be.

Denton Offutt had been so impressed with the way Lincoln performed that he offered him another job upon their return to Illinois. Offutt saw the Sangamon River as a 250-mile stretch of opportunity. The frontier was booming, and towns were springing up all along its banks. Many believed that navigation would soon be improved, and that steamboats would soon bring passengers and goods through their backyards. Offutt was one of the believers. "Mark my words," he said, "the Sangamon is the next Mississippi. Today's settlement is tomorrow's town." If there was one thing Offutt knew, it was that every growing town needed a general store and a pair of men to run it. And so it happened that Abraham Lincoln and Denton Offutt returned to New Salem, Illinois, the scene of their infamous boat rescue, to stay.

New Salem sat atop a bluff on the west bank of the Sangamon, a tightly grouped collection of one- and two-room cabins, workshops, mills, and a schoolhouse that doubled as a church on Sundays. There were perhaps one hundred residents in all.

Mr. Offutt's store being a month or more from opening for business, I found myself in the strange position of having far too much time, and far too little to do. I was much relieved, therefore, to make the acquaintance of a Mr. William Mentor Graham, a young schoolteacher who shared my love of books and who introduced me to Kirkham's Grammar, which I studied until I could recite every rule and example by heart.

History remembers Abe's towering intellect but forgets that, in those days, he was more towering than intellectual. Like his father, he had a natural gift for words. But when it came to writing them down correctly, he remained a victim of his limited schooling. Mentor Graham would help to correct this, and prove a key force in Lincoln's ability to express himself eloquently later in life.

The cramped store at last stocked and ready, Abe went to work filling orders, tracking inventory, and charming customers with his natural wit and endless facts. He and Offutt sold cookware and lanterns, fabric and animal pelts. They measured out sugar and flour and filled bottles of peach brandy, molasses, and red vinegar from little barrels on the shelves behind the counter. “Anything for anyone at any time” as they liked to say. In addition to his meager salary, Abe received an allowance of goods and a small room at the back of the store. Here, he would read by candlelight and write in his journal until well after midnight.

And then, the candle having burned out, and the whole of the settlement having gone to sleep, he would don his coat and go out into the night in search of vampires.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

II

With no Henry to guide him, and tethered to within a few miles of New Salem (for he had to be back to open Offutt's store every morning at seven), Abe's vampire-killing streak ground to a halt in the summer of 1831. He wandered the surrounding woods at night; ventured up and down the banks of the Sangamon. But save for investigating the occasional noise, there was no excitement to be had. It wasn't long before Abe began to put more stock in rest than reconnaissance, and stopped venturing out altogether.

That's not to say there weren't opportunities to fight.

About a half-hour's walk from New Salem was the settlement of Clary's Grove, home to the rather unimaginatively named Clary's Grove Boys, a gang of mostly related young men with a penchant for getting drunk and raising hell.

They were good for no less than two brawls a night in poor Jim Rutledge's tavern, and were known to break up river baptisms by throwing rocks at the parishioners from the woods. One dared not cross them, or they might put out your windows—even stuff you in a barrel and leave you to the mercy of the Sangamon.

Above all, the Boys loved to "wrastle." They prided themselves on being the "meanest, toughest, rowdiest wrastlers around." So when word came that there was a "big fella come to work" at the general store in New Salem, they considered it their duty to size him up in person and, if need be, put him in his place.

Abe knew the Clary's Grove Boys would be looking for a fight, just as they'd looked for one with every able-bodied man who moved into their territory for years. That's precisely why he'd avoided them at all costs, hoping they would simply grow accustomed to having him around. He'd managed to go nearly two whole months without a confrontation (a local record). Unfortunately, Denton Offutt was a little man with a big mouth, and on seeing some of the Boys about, bragged that his new clerk was not only the smartest man in Sangamon County, but that he was "big enough to lick the lot" of them.

They came unannounced to the store and called me outside.

On seeing ten or more gathered there, I asked what business we had. One of them stepped forward and said they intended to put their "best man" on me, on account of Mr. Offutt's having described me as "the toughest man he ever saw." I told them that Mr. Offutt had been mistaken. That I was not tough at all, and that I had no use for such wooling around. My refusal was not taken well, for I was then surrounded and threatened by the whole of the gang. They would not permit me inside, they said, until I'd had a go. If I refused, all of New Salem would know me as a coward, and they would turn our store over from "top to bottom." I agreed, but insisted it be a fair fight. "Oh it ain't going to be much of a fight at all," said one of them, and called Jack to the front.

Jack Armstrong was a brick wall of a man, four inches shorter and twenty pounds heavier than Abe. He was the Clary's Grove Boys' unquestioned leader, and it was easy to see why.

He had a mean look about him, and kept his arms and chest taut as he moved around me, as if his whole body was a drawn bowstring that could be released at any moment. He pulled his shirt over his head and threw it to the ground, circling around me. Preferring to keep mine on, I began to roll up one of my sleeves. I had scarcely begun this when I was suddenly on my back—the air pressed from my lungs.

The Boys cheered as Jack sprang to his feet, and booed as Abe struggled to his.

Clearly, my insistence on a "fair fight" was to have no bearing. Jack came at me again, but this time I was ready—meeting his outstretched arms with mine, our backs and shoulders forming a tabletop as we leaned forward, pushing against each other. Our heads down; our feet kicking up dirt behind us. I suspect he was a good deal surprised at my strength. I was certainly surprised at his. I felt as if I had locked arms with a Russian bear.

But as mighty as Jack Armstrong was, he was nothing compared to the vampires Abe had grappled with in the past. With his lungs again full, Lincoln reached up and grabbed Jack's neck with one hand, and the waist of his pants with the other.

Holding him thus, I lifted his body clean off the ground and over my head, keeping him there as he squirmed and struggled and cussed. This spectacle produced in his friends no shortage of distress, and I was suddenly set upon by the lot of them, punching and kicking at me in a group. This was an injustice that I could not allow.

Abe's face went bright red, and he brought his full strength to

bear, throwing Jack Armstrong against the side of the general store and yelling, “I’m the big buck of the lick!”

I grabbed the man nearest me by the hair and struck him in the face with my fist, rendering him insensible. The man nearest him caught another of my fists in his belly. I was quite content to whip the lot of them, one by one, and would have done so, had Jack not risen to his feet and called off his men.

Now it was Lincoln’s body that tensed like a drawn bowstring, his eyes fixed on a pair of Clary’s Grove Boys just out of arm’s reach.

Jack pulled a splinter or two from his side and stood next to me. “Boys,” he said, “I believe this man to be the toughest son’bitch ever to set foot in New Salem. Any man’s got a quarrel with him’s got a quarrel with Jack Armstrong.”

It was perhaps the most important battle of Abe’s early life, for word quickly spread from one end of Sangamon County to the other: here was a young man possessed of strong mind and body. A man they could be proud of. Their inauspicious introduction aside, the Clary’s Grove Boys quickly became some of Abe’s staunchest supporters, and would prove invaluable political assets in the years to come. Some of them even became his close friends, though none so close as Jack Armstrong himself.

I regretted losing my temper and embarrassing him in front of his relations. So, on the evening after our match, I invited him to share a drink at the store.

Abe and Jack shared a small bottle of peach brandy in the store’s back room, the sky still slightly blue even though it was approaching nine o’clock. Abe sat on the end of his bed, having offered the room’s sole chair to his guest.

I was surprised to find in this burly Armstrong a quiet, thoughtful man. Though four years my junior, he had a maturity surpassing that of many men twice his age, and an ease of conversation that one would not expect given his appearance. On seeing my copy of Kirkham’s Grammar, he spoke of the value of reading and writing, and bemoaned his shortcomings in both.

“Truth is, it was more important to be rough,” said Jack. “This is rough country, and it takes a rough man.”

“Must you choose one or the other?” asked Abe. “I’ve always found time for books, and I know something of rough country.”

Jack smiled. “Not Illinois rough.”

Abe asked what he meant.

“You ever seen somebody you love tore up and scattered all over the ground?”

Abe had not, and was clearly surprised by the answer. Jack

fidgeted a little; looked at the floor.

"I gone walkin' with a friend one night," he said. "We was both nine, and the two of us was headed home from throwin' rocks at flatboats, twistin' down a trail we knew by heart. One minute he was right there next to me, chatterin' away in the dark. Next minute he'd been pull't up by a bear's claws—pull't into a tree by his head and drug clear to the top. I couldn't see nothin' up there in the dark. I could only hear him screamin'. Feel the warm drops on my head… on my lips. I ran and fetched help, and the men came runnin' with their flintlocks. But there was nothin' for 'em to kill. We spent half the morning pickin' him up off the ground. Jared. Jared Linder was his name."

There was silence now, and Abe knew he mustn't be the first to fill it.

"Folks live 'round here know there's somethin' about these woods," said Jack. "They know a man who don't have his wits about him—a man who ain't strong enough to take all comers—well, they know that's a man liable to get himself killed walking one place to the next. People say us Boys stick close on account of our being kin. 'Cause we like raisin' a ruckus. The truth of it is, we stick close 'cause that's the only chance we got at growin' old. Truth is, we act rough 'cause a weak man's a dead man."

"And you're certain?" asked Abe. "I mean, you're absolutely certain it was a bear?"

"Well, it sure as hell weren't no tree-climbin' horse."

"I mean… might it have been something a bit more… unusual?"

"Oh," said Jack, beginning to laugh. "You mean was it somethin' like out of a story? Some kind a ghost?"

"Yes."

"Hell, those stories've been goin' up and down the river for years. Wild stories. People talking about witches, and devils, and —"

"Vampires?"

All trace of humor left Jack's face at the mention of the word.

"People talking nonsense. Just scared is all."

Maybe it was the half a bottle of peach brandy in his blood, or the feeling that he'd found a kindred spirit. Maybe he just couldn't stand to keep all those secrets to himself anymore. Whatever the reason, Abe made a very sudden, very risky decision.

"Jack… if I tell you something incredible, will you promise to hear me fairly?"

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

III

Abe paced back and forth… back and forth over the soft dirt of the street, throwing the occasional glance toward the newly finished courthouse on the other side of the square and at the second floor of the saloon across the street, where a light still burned behind the curtained window of a whore. The late-summer weather was much more agreeable this time around. So was the company.

It had taken no small amount of persuasion, but Jack had at last agreed to come to Springfield. At first, he had refused to believe a word of it—going so far as to call me a "damned liar" and threatening to "thrash" me for thinking him a fool. I begged his patience, however, and promised that I would either prove every word true, or pack my things and leave New Salem forever. I made this promise with every expectation of success, for that very morning a letter had at long last arrived.

The letter was addressed exactly as Abe had instructed above Henry's fireplace:

ABRAHAM LINCOLN
WEST OF DECATUR, ILLINOIS
CARE OF MR. JOHN HANKS

It had been delivered to his relatives two weeks earlier, and forwarded to New Salem. Abe had torn it open upon seeing the familiar handwriting, and read it a dozen times at the counter throughout the day.

Abraham,

My apologies for not having written these many months. Vanishing is, I regret, a necessary part of my existence from time to time. I will write more often when I have settled into a more permanent home. In the interim, I hope you have settled into yours happily, and remain in good spirits and health. If you remain agreeable, you may visit upon the individual named below at your leisure. I believe him only a short ride from where you are now. I must warn you, however—he is quite a bit cleverer than those you have visited on in the past. You may well mistake him for one of your own kind.

Timothy Douglas.

The tavern near the square.

Calhoun.

Ever,

—H

Abe knew the tavern well. It was, after all, the site of his greatest vampire-hunting embarrassment. Could I have been right all along? Had the half-naked man who'd run off screaming for help been a vampire after all?

We walked in, plainly dressed (my long coat stored in my saddlebag outside). I took in the faces at each table, half expecting to see the curly-haired gentleman glaring back in his snow-covered long shirt. Would he run at the sight of me? Would his vampire nature compel him to attack? But I saw him not. Jack and I made to the counter, where the aproned barkeep busied himself polishing a whiskey glass.

"Pardon me, sir. My friend and I are looking for a Mr. Douglas."

"Tim Douglas?" asked the barkeep, his eyes fixed on his work.

"The same."

"And what business might you and Mr. Douglas have?"

"Business of an urgent and private sort. Do you know where he is?"

The barkeep seemed amused.

"Well, sir, you needn't look far, that's for certain."

He put down the glass and stuck out his hand. "Tim Douglas. And your name, sir?"

Jack burst out laughing. There had to be some mistake. This inconsequential little man—a man who spent his nights polishing dirty glasses and playing matchmaker to whores and drunks? This was Henry's vampire? Of course, I had no choice but take his hand, and did so. It was as pink and warm as my own.

"Hanks," said Abe. "Abe Hanks, and I beg your forgiveness, for I mistook you to say 'Tom' Douglas. Yes, Thomas Douglas is the gentleman we're looking for. Do you know where we might find him?"

"Well, sir, no. I'm afraid I'm not familiar with anyone by that name."

"Then I thank you for your trouble and bid you a good night."

Abe hurried out of the tavern, Jack laughing all the while behind him.

I resolved to wait. We had come this far, and Henry had never failed me in the past. At the very least, we would wait for this barkeep to close up and follow him home in the shadows.

After hours spent wandering the courthouse square, Abe (who'd since donned his long coat) and Jack (who hadn't stopped teasing him since they left the tavern) finally saw the lights go dark and the barkeep make his way into the street.

He walked down Sixth Street toward Adams. We followed discreetly, Jack a good three paces behind; the ax ready in my hands. I darted into the shadows with every twitch of the barkeep's head—certain he meant to turn back and discover us (Jack could hardly contain his laughter at the sight of my doing so). The little man kept to the center of the street, hands in his pockets. Whistling. Walking as any other man would walk, and making me feel a fool with each step. He rounded Seventh Street, and we followed. He rounded Monroe, and we followed. But on rounding Ninth Street, after letting him escape our sight for the briefest of moments, we saw no trace of him. There was no alley he could have slipped into. No house he could have entered in so short a time. How could it be?

"So… you're the one."

The voice came from behind us. I spun around, prepared to strike—but could not. For here was mighty Jack Armstrong, standing on his toes. His back arched. His eyes wide. And here was the little vampire standing behind him, a sharp claw pressed to his throat. Had Jack been able to see those black eyes and shining fangs, his terror would have been twofold. The barkeep suggested that I lay my ax on the ground if I did not wish to see my friend's blood spilled. I thought his suggestion a good one, and let the weapon fall from my hand.

"You're the one Henry spoke of. The one with a talent for killing the dead."

Though Abe was surprised to hear Henry's name, his face betrayed nothing. He could hear Jack's panting quicken as the claw pressed harder against his throat.

"I'm curious," asked the barkeep. "Have you ever wondered why? Why a vampire takes such an interest in ridding the earth of his own kind? Why he sends a man to kill in his stead? Or have you simply done his bidding blindly—the unquestioning, undyingly loyal servant?"

"I serve no man but myself," said Abe.

The barkeep laughed. "Avowed as only an American could."

"Help me, Abe," said Jack.

"We are all servants," said the barkeep. "However, of the two of us, I have the fortune of knowing which master I serve."

Jack began to panic. "P-please! Let me go!" He struggled to free himself, but this only dug the barkeep's claw in deeper. A

trickle of blood ran over his Adam's apple as the vampire gave a reassuring "shhhh…."

Abe used the opportunity to slip a hand into his coat pocket, unnoticed.

I must strike swiftly, lest my thoughts betray my plan.

"Your beloved Henry is no less deserving of that ax than the rest of us," said the barkeep. "He merely had the good fortune of finding you fir—"

I pulled the martyr from my pocket and struck it against my buckle with all the quickness I possessed.

It lit.

Brighter than the sun—white light and sparks filling the whole of the street. The vampire retreated and shielded his eyes, and Jack pulled free. I knelt, grabbed the handle of the ax, and threw from my knees. The blade lodged in the vampire's chest with a crack of bone and rush of escaped air, and he fell, clumsily clutching at the handle with one hand, dragging himself along the ground with the other. I let the martyr slip from my fingers to burn its last upon the ground, and retrieved my ax from the creature's chest. That same familiar fear on his face. The fear of what hell or oblivion awaited. I did not care to revel in it. I raised the ax above my head and took his.

Jack was shaken to the point of being sick on his boots. Shaken by the fact that he'd been an inch away from death. By the glimpse he'd caught of those black eyes; those fangs after breaking free. He didn't say a word on the ride home. Neither man did. They reached New Salem after sunrise and were about to part company in silence when Jack, who was continuing on to Clary's Grove, pulled up his reins and turned toward the general store.

"Abe," he said. "I wanna know everything there is to know 'bout killin' vampires."

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

SIX

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

Ann

I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming… I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost.

—Abraham Lincoln, in a letter to Mrs. Lydia Bixby,
mother of two sons killed in the Civil War
November 21st, 1864

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

I

New Salem hadn't grown as quickly as Denton Offutt hoped; in fact, it may have lost a few residents in the months after he opened the store. The Sangamon was still a long way from being "the next Mississippi." Navigation remained a treacherous affair, and all but a few steamboats remained trapped in the wider waters to the south, with all of their precious customers and cargo. It didn't help matters that New Salem had a second general store closer to the center of the settlement, siphoning off customers before they'd even had a chance to reach his front door. By the time the ice began to break on the sluggish Sangamon in the spring of 1832, Offutt's store had failed, and Abe was out of a job. His anger is evident in an entry dated March 27th.

Bade farewell to [Offutt] this morning, the last of the goods having been sold or traded; my belongings were moved to the Herndon place until such time as I am able to make other arrangements. I care not that he has gone. I feel no sadness at his leaving, and feel not tempted in the slightest to follow his listless example. I have never known idle hands, and shall not know them now. I resolve to remain. I shall prosper yet.

As always, Abe was true to his word. He did whatever it took to make money: Splitting rails. Clearing land. Building sheds. His relationship with the Clary's Grove Boys paid its first dividends, too, in the form of the odd jobs they intimidated locals into giving him. He even found work as an "ax man" on one of the few steamboats making its way up the Sangamon, standing on its bow and chopping away any obstructions that slowed its struggle north. And through it all, he never stopped hunting.

I have given a great deal of thought to what the barkeep said. Have I ever wondered why Henry takes such an interest in hunting vampires? Have I ever wondered why he sends me in his stead? I admit that I have spent many an hour perplexed by these questions. Wondering if perhaps there is some deeper truth in them. That I am the sworn enemy of vampires doing the bidding of a vampire? There is no eluding this fact, nor the paradox inherent in it. That I am being used to further the unseen ends of one vampire in particular? I must admit the possibility. Yet after

deliberating the whole, I have come to this conclusion:

It matters not.

If indeed I am nothing more than Henry's servant, so be it. So long as the result is fewer vampires, I shall serve happily.

Henry's letters began to arrive more frequently, and Abe ventured out when they did. But he didn't venture alone.

I have found in Jack an able and eager hunting companion, and have endevored [sic] to share with him the whole of my knowledge with regard to destroying vampires (I needn't teach him anything of quickness or bravery, for he enjoys a surplus of both). I am thankful for the help, for Henry's letters have been coming so frequently that I find myself running from one end of the state to the other.

One night Abe found himself running through the streets of Decatur with a bloodied ax in his hands, Jack beside him with a crossbow. No more than ten paces ahead of them, a bald man made a beeline for the Sangamon River. The right side of his shirt was soaked with blood, and his right arm was dangling by his side, attached to his body by nothing more than a few bits of sinew and skin.

We ran past a pair of gentlemen on the street. They watched our little procession speed by, yelling after us: "You there! Stop at once!" What a sight we must have made! I could not help but laugh.

Abe and Jack chased the one-armed man to the water's edge.

He dove in and disappeared beneath the black water. Jack would have gone in after him had I not grabbed him by the collar and yelled "no!" with what little voice I had left. Jack stood on the bank, gasping for breath and pointing his crossbow at every bubble that surfaced.

"I told you to wait for my signal!" yelled Abe.

"We would have been waiting all damned night!"

"Well, now we've lost him!"

"Shut up and keep a sharp eye! He has to come up for air sooner or later…."

Abe looked at Jack, his fury surrendering to a quizzical smile… then to laughter.

"Yes," laughed Abe. "I expect he shall be coming up for air any day now."

Abe put a hand on Jack's shoulder and led him away from the riverbank, his laughter echoing through the sleeping streets.

If [Jack] is wanting in anything, it is patience. He is too quick to spring from hiding—and, I fear, too eager to share what he knows with his companions from Clary's Grove. I am ever

reminding him of the need for secrecy, and of the madness that would overtake all of Sangamon County if word of our errands were to spread beyond the two of us.

He'd been in the county all of a year, but in that short time Abe had become something of a local celebrity. A "young man whose hands are just as skilled with an ax as they are with a quill," as his schoolteacher friend, Mentor Graham, put it. Abe had seen and heard enough from his customers to know what was on their minds.

Chief among their concerns is the river itself. What a state it is in! Barely more than a creek in some parts; choked by all manner of driftwood and obstructions. If we are to enjoy the bounty of the Mississippi, it shall need to be greatly improved, so that steamboats may navigate it freely. Such improvement, of course, will require a tremendous sum of money. I know of only one way (outside thievery) to procure it.

Abraham Lincoln decided to run for office. In announcing his candidacy for the Illinois State Legislature in a county newspaper, he struck a populist, if somewhat defeatist, chord:

I am young, and unknown to many of you. I was born, and have ever remained, in the most humble walks of life. I have no wealthy or popular relations or friends to recommend me. My case is thrown exclusively upon the independent voters of the county; and if elected, they will have conferred a favor upon me for which I shall be unremitting in my labors to compensate. But if the good people in their wisdom shall see fit to keep me in the background, I have been too familiar with disappointments to be very much chagrined.

Shortly after Abe's announcement, word of a "war with the Indians" reached New Salem.

A Sauk war chief named Black Hawk has violated a treaty and crossed [the Mississippi] into the village of Saukenuk to the north. He and his British Band * mean to kill or drive out every white settler they encounter and reclaim land believed rightfully theirs. Governor Reynolds has put out a call for six hundred able-bodied men to take up arms against these savages and protect the gentle people of Illinois.

Despite his political ambitions (or because of them), Abe was among the first in Sangamon County to volunteer. He would recall his excitement years later.

I had lusted for war since I was a boy of twelve. Here, at last, was my chance to see it firsthand! I imagined the glory of charging into battle—firing my flintlock and swinging my ax! I imagined slaughtering scores of Indians with ease, for they could

be no quicker or stronger than vampires.

The volunteers gathered in Beardstown, a growing settlement on the banks of the Illinois River. Here, the men were given a crash course in the barest essentials of warfare by a handful of experienced militiamen. Before journeying north, Abe's unit—a ragtag group of volunteers that included men from New Salem and Clary's Grove—elected him to serve as their captain.

Captain Lincoln! I will admit that tears filled my eyes. It was the first time I had felt such esteem. The first time that I had been elected to lead my fellow men, and their sacred trust gave me more satisfaction than any election I have won or any office I have held since.

Among those marching off to battle with Abe were fellow vampire hunter Jack Armstrong and a young major named John Todd Stuart. Stuart was a slender man with "a high forehead and neatly parted black hair." He had a "prominent" nose and "unkind" eyes that "did his gentle nature an injustice." Stuart would play a crucial role in Lincoln's postwar life, as an encouraging lawyer in Springfield, as a friendly adversary in Congress, and most of all as the cousin of a raven-haired Kentucky belle named Mary Todd.

The realities of war proved far less exciting than Abe's imagination had conjured. With thousands of Illinois militiamen engaging the rebellious Indians to the north, there was little for the volunteers to do but sit and swelter. From an entry dated May 30th, 1832—after weeks spent camped out miles from the fields of battle:

My men have suffered greatly (from boredom), much blood has been shed (by mosquitoes), and I have swung my ax mightily (chopping firewood). Surely we have earned our place in the annals of history—for never has there been so little war in a war.

In early July, Abe and his men were finally discharged and began the long journey home, not a single war story to tell among them. Abe reached New Salem (where he found two letters in need of his "urgent attention") less than two weeks before the election for state legislature. He resumed his candidacy at once, shaking hands and knocking on doors day and night. Unfortunately the field had ballooned to thirteen candidates while he'd been away battling mosquitoes. With so much time lost and so many candidates splitting votes, he didn't stand a chance.

Abe finished eighth. But there was a silver lining, one that even the depressed and defeated Lincoln couldn't help but see: of all three hundred votes cast in New Salem, only twenty-three had

been cast against him. Those who knew him overwhelmingly endorsed him. “It was merely a matter of shaking more hands.”

His political career had begun.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

II

Lincoln needed a success in the wake of his first political defeat, and he knew just where to find it. From an entry dated March 6th, 1833:

I shall do what Offutt could not. By God, I shall run a profitable store in New Salem! Berry * and I have today purchased the whole on $300 of credit, which we have every expectation of paying back within two years' time. In three years, we shall have saved enough to purchase our building!

Again, the realities proved far less exciting than Abe's imagination. There were already two general stores in New Salem by the time Lincoln/Berry opened its doors, and barely enough demand to keep those open. Historians have puzzled over why a man with Abe's intellect and his father's "horse sense" didn't foresee the problem of adding a third store to the mix. Or why he seems to have so thoroughly misjudged his partner, William Berry, who proved shiftless, unreliable, and "perpetually drunk."

The answer seems to be something more than ambition. With the store on the verge of collapse less than a year later, Abe's journal entries grow increasingly exhausted; desperate. One in particular stands out—not only for its abruptness, but for its closing reference to (we can only assume) his mother.

I must endure.

I must be more than I am.

I must not fail.

I must not fail her.

But fail he did—at least as far as the world of dry goods and ladies' hats was concerned. The Lincoln/Berry store simply "winked out" in 1834, leaving each man with debts of more than $200. In the end, the unreliable Berry couldn't even be counted on to stay alive. He died a few years later, leaving Abe saddled with the whole amount. It would take him seventeen years to pay it off.

Had the timing been different, Abe might have packed up and left New Salem forever. But as it happened, there was another election for the Illinois State Legislature just a few short months off. Having little else to do ("none of Henry's letters having arrived of late"), and encouraged by his good showing the

last time around, Abe resolved to run again—and this time, he was determined to run properly. He traveled the county on horseback and on foot, stopping to speak with anyone he encountered. He shook the hands of farmhands toiling in the scorched fields and won their respect with demonstrations of his own frontier-learned skills and God-given strength. He spoke at churches and taverns, horse races and picnics, peppering his stump speech (undoubtedly written on scraps of paper in his pocket as he traveled) with self-deprecating stories of flatboat mishaps and mosquito battles.

"I have never seen a man with a greater gift for speaking," remembered Mentor Graham after Abe's death. "He was an ungainly—some might say unpleasant-looking—fellow… tall as a tree, with pant legs that stopped a good six inches above his shoes. His hair was in a constant state of untidiness; his coat ever in need of pressing. When he took his place in front of the crowd, they studied him with furrowed brows and folded arms. But when he launched into his address, their doubts vanished, and they were inevitably moved to thunderous applause—even tears by its conclusion."

This time he shook enough hands. Abraham Lincoln was elected to the Illinois State Legislature on August 4th, 1834.

A poor son of the frontier, with nary a dollar to his name and not a year of schooling to his credit, sent to Vandalia * to speak for his fellow man! A rail-splitter seated beside men of letters! I admit that I am intimidated at the prospect of meeting such men. Will they accept me as their collegue [sic], or shun me as the unlearned clodhopper with holes in his shoes? In either case, I suspect that my life is forever changed, and cannot help my excitement as December nears.

Abe's feeling proved correct. His life would never be the same. He would soon count statesmen and scholars among his friends; trade the backwoods folksiness of Sangamon County for the burgeoning sophistication of Vandalia. He'd taken the first step on his way to being a lawyer. His first step on the road to the White House. But it was only one of two turning points that year.

For he had also fallen madly in love.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

III

Jack was giving serious thought to turning his crossbow on Abe. They'd just made a miserable 200-mile trip north to the town of Chicago, sleeping under the freezing stars of late autumn, trudging through knee-high mud and waist-high water, "and the ganglin' fool'd done nothin' but talk 'bout a girl the whole damned way."

Her name is Ann Rutledge. I believe her twenty or one-and-twenty years, though I dare not ask. It matters not. Never has a more perfect creature graced this earth! Never has a man been more in love than I! I shall write of nothing but her beauty in these pages for as long as I live.

Armstrong and Lincoln sat with their backs against the rear of a stable stall and their bottoms on a bed of loose hay, their breath visible in the cool night air coming off of Lake Michigan. A horse's backside loomed over their heads, every twitch of its tail giving rise to the fear that something naturally foul was about to occur. They'd been waiting for their prey all night, one of them speaking in smiling whispers, the other contemplating murder.

"Have you ever been in love, Jack?"

Jack gave no answer.

"It is a strange feeling indeed. One finds oneself intoxicated with happiness for no reason at all. One's thoughts turn to the most peculiar things…."

Jack pictured a steaming pile of manure falling into Abe's mouth.

"I long for the smell of her. Do you think me strange for saying so? I long for the smell of her, and for the feeling of her delicate fingers in mine. I long to look at—"

The stable doors opened outside. Boot heels against wooden planks. Abe and Jack readied their weapons.

The vampire could not smell us over the animal stench, nor hear us trampling hay. His footsteps ceased; the stall door opened. Before he had time enough to blink, my ax was thrown in his chest, and Jack's arrow shot through his eye and into his brain. He fell backward, shrieking and grabbing at his face as blood ran around the sides of the arrow. Upset by the noise, his horse reared up—I grabbed it by the bridle for fear that it would

trample us both. As I did so, Jack pulled the ax from the vampire's chest, raised it above his head, and brought it down on the creature's face, splitting it clean in two. The vampire was still. Jack raised the ax above his head a second time, and brought it down with even greater force. He did this a third, a fourth time, striking the creature's head with the blunt side of the blade again and again until nothing more than a flattened bag of skin and hair and blood remained.

"My God, Armstrong… what's come over you?"

Jack pulled the ax blade—crunch—from what had formerly been the vampire's face. He looked up at Abe, out of breath.

"I pretended he was you."

Abe held his tongue on the journey home.

Ann Mayes Rutledge was the third of ten children—daughter of New Salem's cofounder, James, and his wife, Mary. She was four years Abe's junior, but every bit his equal when it came to her appetite for books. She'd been away during most of Abe's first year and a half in New Salem, tending to a sickly aunt in Decatur and reading everything she could get her hands on to pass the time. There is no record of what happened to her aunt (either she died, got better, or Ann simply grew tired of caring for her), but we know that Ann returned to New Salem before or during the summer of 1834. We know this because she and Abe first met on July 29th at the home of Mentor Graham, whose library both borrowed from, and whose tutelage both sought from time to time. Graham remembered her as a twenty-something with "large, expressive blue eyes," a "fair complexion," and auburn hair—"not flaxen as some have said." She had "a good mouth and good teeth in it. Sweet as honey and nervous as a butterfly." He also remembered the moment when Abe first made her acquaintance. "I have never seen a man's jaw hang quite so low before or since. He looked up from his book and was hit square in the heart by that ancient arrow. The two exchanged pleasantries, but I recall the conversation being one-sided, for Lincoln could hardly keep his wits about him—so struck was he by this lovely vision. So amazed was he by her love and knowledge of books."

Abe wrote about Ann that very day.

Never has there been such a girl! Never has a creature so beautiful and so bright existed in one body! She is a good foot shorter than I, with blue eyes and auburn hair and a shining, perfect smile. She is a bit slender, though it cannot be held against her, for it suits her kind, delicate nature. How shall I ever sleep again knowing she is out there in the night? How shall I ever keep another thought in my head when she is all I care to

think about?

Abe and Ann saw more of each other, first at Mentor Graham's, where they carried on lively discussions of Shakespeare and Byron; then on long, late summer walks, where they carried on lively discussions of life and love; then on Ann's favorite hilltop overlooking the Sangamon, where they hardly talked at all.

I am almost ashamed to record it here, for I fear it may somehow cheapen the thing itself, but I cannot resist. Our lips met this afternoon. It happened as we sat upon a blanket, watching the occasional flatboat drift silently by below. "Abraham," said she. I turned, and was surprised to find her face so close to my own. "Abraham… do you believe what Byron says? That 'love will find a way through paths where wolves fear to prey'?" I told her that I believed it with all my heart, and she pressed her mouth to mine without another word.

It is the moment that I wish to remember with my dying breath.

Three months remain before I am required in Vandalia, and I plan to fill every moment of them with Ann's company. She is the most fetching… most tender… most brilliant star in the heavens! Her only fault is that she lacks sense enough to avoid falling in love with such a fool as I!

Abe would never write with such flowery flourish again. Not of his wife; not even of his children. It was the stomach-turning, obsessive, euphoric love of youth. A first love.

December came "too quickly." He bade Ann a tearful farewell and rode to Vandalia to take his oath as a member of the legislature. The prospect of being a "rail-splitter seated beside men of letters" (which had previously given him fits of excitement) now hardly mattered at all. For two agonizing months, he sat in the Capitol thinking of Ann Rutledge and little else. When the session closed at the end of January, he was "out the door before the sound of the gavel ceased to echo," and sped home for what would be the best spring of his life.

There is no music sweeter than the sound of her voice. No painting more beautiful than her smiling face. We sat in the shade of a tree this afternoon, Ann reading Macbeth as I lay my head across her lap. She held the book in one hand, and played with my hair with the fingers of the other—gently kissing my forehead with each turn of the page. Here, at last, is all that is right with the world. Here is life. She is the antidote to all the darkness that poisons this world. When she is near I care nothing of debts or vampires. There is only her.

I have resolved to ask her father's permission to marry. There is but one insignificant obstacle in the way of my doing so, and I shall see to its removal at once.

That "insignificant obstacle" was named John MacNamar—and contrary to Abe's flippant reference, he posed a serious threat to their happiness.

That's because he and Ann were engaged to be married.

[MacNamar] is by all accounts a man of questionable character, who pledged his love to Ann when she was but eighteen, only to depart for New York before such time as they could marry. The few letters she received from him in Decatur were hardly those of a man in love, and it has been ages since she has received any word from him at all. Until he releases her, however, I shall not be satisfied. But I take heart (for the course of true love has never run smoothly *) and expect that all shall be swiftly and happily resolved.

Abe did what he did best. He wrote John MacNamar a letter.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

IV

On the morning of August 23rd, Abe jotted ten innocuous words in his journal:

Note from Ann—not feeling well today. Off to visit.

It had been a perfect summer. Abe and Ann met nearly every day, taking long, pointless walks along the river, stealing kisses when they were sure no one was looking. It didn't matter—all of New Salem and Clary's Grove knew the two were in love, thanks in part to Jack Armstrong's constant griping on the subject.

Her mother met me at the door and told me that she wished no visitors, but on hearing our voices, Ann called me in. I found her lying in bed, an open copy of Don Juan on her chest. With Mrs. Rutledge's permission, we sat alone. I took her hand in mine and remarked on its warmth. Ann smiled at my concern. "It is merely a fever," she said. "It shall pass." As we talked, I could not help the feeling that something else troubled her. Something more than a summer cold. I pressed her, and her tears confirmed my suspicions. I could scarcely believe what she next imparted.

Ann's long-lost fiancé, John MacNamar, had returned.

"He came to see me night before last," she said. "He was furious, Abe. He looked sickly; acted strangely. He told me of your letter, and demanded my answer in person. 'Tell me now that you love this other man!' he said. 'Tell me that, and I shall leave this place tonight and never return!' "

Ann gave her answer: she loved no man but Abraham Lincoln. True to his word, MacNamar left that night. Ann would never see him again. Abe's fury is evident in an entry made that evening.

I wrote this MacNamar of our love—asking him to do the gentlemanly thing and release her. Rather than reply, he crossed a thousand miles of wilderness to waylay a woman he had ignored these three long years! To claim her as his own after casting her aside! Scoundrel! Had I been there when the coward appeared, I would have broken his skull and cut strops * from his back! Yet I rejoice, for he is gone—and with him the only impediment to our happiness. I shall delay no longer! When Ann is recovered, I shall ask her father's permission.

But Ann would not recover.

By the time Abe returned on the morning of the 24th, she was too sick to speak more than a few labored words at a time. Her fever grew worse; her breathing shallow. By midday, she couldn't speak at all, and slipped in and out of consciousness. When she did wake, it was to nightmarish delusions—her body convulsing to the point that her bed rattled against the floor. The Rutledges joined Abe at her side, keeping her compresses cool, the candles burning. The doctor had been there with his sleeves rolled up since midday. At first, he'd been "certain" it was typhoid. Now he wasn't so sure. Delusions, convulsions, coma—and all in such a short time? He'd never seen anything like it.

But Abe had.

A dread crept over me throughout the course of the day and evening. An old, familiar dread. I was a boy of nine again, watching my mother sweat and suffer through the same nightmares. Whispering the same futile prayers; feeling the same unbearable guilt. It was I who had brought this upon her. I who had written the letter demanding she be released. And who had I demanded this of? A man who left mysteriously and returned sickly and ashen… a man who had waited till nightfall to confront his betrothed… a man who would sooner see her suffer and die than see her in the arms of another.

A vampire.

This time there was no last embrace. No momentary reprieve. This time she merely slipped away. God's finest work. Defiled.

Finished.

Ann Rutledge died on August 25th, 1835. She was twenty-two years old.

Abe didn't take it well.

FIG. 1-3. - ABE WEEPS AS ANN RUTLEDGE WASTES AWAY IN AN ETCHING FROM TOM FREEMAN'S BOOK 'LINCOLN'S FIRST LOVE' (1890).

25th August, 1835

Mr. Henry Sturges

200 Lucas Place, St. Louis

By Express

Dear Henry,

I thank you for your kindness these several years, and beg a parting favor of you. Below is the name of one who deserves it sooner. The only blessing in this life is the end of it.

John MacNamar

New York

—A

For the next two days, Jack Armstrong and the Clary's Grove

Boys kept watch over him in round-the-clock shifts. They stripped him of his pocketknife and carpentry tools; took away his flintlock rifle. They even confiscated his belt for fear that he would hang himself with it. Jack saw to it that Abe's hidden stash of hunting weapons was moved well beyond his reach.

For all their care, there was one weapon they missed. None of them thought to look beneath my pillow, where I kept a [pistol] hidden. Jack having briefly left my side that second night, I retrieved it and pressed the barrel to the side of my head—resolved to be done with it. I imagined the ball penetrating my skull. I wondered if I would hear the shot, or feel the pain of it tearing through me. I wondered if I would see my brains strike the opposite wall before I died, or if I would see nothing but darkness—a bedside candle blown out. I held it there, but I did not fire….

Live…

I could not….

I could not fail her. I threw the weapon on the floor and wept, damning myself for cowardice. Damning everything. Damning God.

Rather than kill himself that night, Abe did what he always did in times of immense grief or unbridled joy—he put pen to paper.

The Suicide's Soliloquy *

Yes! I've resolved the deed to do,
And this the place to do it:
This heart I'll rush a dagger through
Though I in hell should rue it!
Sweet steel! Come forth from out your sheath,
And glist'ning, speak your powers;
Rip up the organs of my breath,
And draw my blood in showers!
I strike! It quivers in that heart
Which drives me to this end;
I draw and kiss the bloody dart,
My last—my only friend!

Henry Sturges galloped into New Salem the next morning.

He sent the others away at once, claiming to be a "close cousin." The two of us alone, I imparted the whole of Ann's murder, making no attempt to hide my grief. Henry took me in his arms as I wept. I remember this distinctly, for I was doubly surprised—both that a vampire could show such warmth, and by the sensation of his cold skin.

"It is the fortunate man who does not lose one so loved in his

lifetime," said Henry, "and we are not fortunate men."

"You have lost one as beautiful as she? As kind?"

"My dear Abraham… one could fill a cemetery with the women I have wept over."

"I do not wish to live without her, Henry."

"I know."

"She is too beautiful too… too good…."

"I know…"

Abe could not help his tears.

"The more precious His gift," said Henry, "the more anxious God for its return."

"I must not be without her…."

Henry sat on the bed beside Abe, holding him in his arms… rocking him like a child… debating with himself.

"There is another way," he said at last.

Abe sat up straight on the bed; ran a sleeve over his tears.

"The older of us, we… we can wake the deceased, provided the body is whole enough, and less than a few weeks dead."

It took Abe a moment to comprehend what Henry had said.

"Swear to me you speak the truth…."

"She would live, Abraham… but I warn you—she would be cursed to live forever."

Here was the answer to my grief! A way to see the smile of my beloved again—to feel her delicate fingers in mine! We would sit in the shade of our favorite tree, reading Shakespeare and Byron for all time, her finger carelessly twirling my hair as I lay in her lap. We would walk the years away on the banks of the Sangamon! The thought of it brought such relief. Such bliss…

But it was fleeting. For when I pictured her pale skin, her black eyes and hollow fangs, I felt nothing of the love we had shared. We would be united, yes—but it would be a cold finger gently twirling my hair. Not in the shade of our favorite tree, but in the darkness of our curtained house. We would walk the years away on the banks of the Sangamon—but it would be only I who grew old.

I was tempted to the point of madness, but I could not. I could not indulge the very darkness that had taken her from me. The very evil that had taken my mother.

Ann Rutledge was laid to rest at the Old Concord Burial Ground on Sunday, August 30th. Abe stood silently as her coffin was lowered into the earth. A coffin he'd insisted on making himself. He'd inscribed a single line on its lid:

In solitude, where we are least alone.

Henry was waiting outside my cabin upon my return from

the funeral. It was not yet midday, and he held a parasol over his head to shield his skin, dark glasses over his eyes. He asked me to follow him. Not a word passed between us as we walked a half mile into the woods to a small clearing. There I saw a pale, blond-haired little man tied to a post by his arms and ankles, stripped naked and gagged. Firewood and kindling had been piled at his feet, and a large jug placed on the ground near him.

"Abraham," said Henry, "allow me to introduce Mr. John MacNamar."

He writhed at the sight of us—his skin covered in blisters and boils. "He is quite new," said Henry. "Still sensitive to light." I felt the pine torch as it was placed in my hand… felt the heat on my face as it was lit. But my eyes never left John MacNamar's. "I expect he shall be even more sensitive to flame," said Henry. I could think of nothing to say. I could only look at him as I approached. He shook as I did, trying to free himself. I could not help but pity him. His fear. His helplessness.

This is madness.

Still, I longed to see him burn. I dropped the torch on the woodpile. He struggled against his bonds to no avail. Screamed until his lungs bled with nary a sound. The flames grew waist-high almost at once, forcing me back as his feet and legs began to blacken and burn. So great was the heat that his blond hair blew continually upward, as if he stood in a gale. Henry remained close to the flames—nearer than I was able. With the jug in hand, he repeatedly poured water over MacNamar's head, chest, and back, keeping him alive as his legs were burned to the bone. Prolonging his agony. I felt tears on my face.

I am dead.

This went on for ten, perhaps fifteen minutes until—at my insistence—he was finally allowed to die. Henry doused the flames and waited for the charred corpse to cool.

Henry placed a gentle hand on Abe's shoulder. Abe brushed it away.

"Why do you kill your own, Henry? And do me the honor of the truth, for I deserve as much."

"I have never given you otherwise."

"Then say it now and be done with it. Why do you kill your own? And why do—"

"Why do I send you in my stead, yes, yes I know. My God, I forget how young you are."

Henry ran a hand over his face. This was a conversation he had hoped to avoid.

"Why do I kill my own? I have given you my answer: because

it is one thing to feed on the blood of the old and the sick and the treacherous, but quite another to take sleeping children from their beds; quite another to march men and women to their deaths in chains, as you have seen with your own eyes."

"Then why me? Why not kill them yourself?"

Henry paused to collect his thoughts.

"When I rode here from St. Louis," he said at last, "I knew that you would not be dead when I arrived. I knew it with all my heart… because I know your purpose."

Abe lifted his eyes to meet Henry's.

"Most men have no purpose but to exist, Abraham; to pass quietly through history as minor characters upon a stage they cannot even see. To be the playthings of tyrants. But you… you were born to fight tyranny. It is your purpose, Abraham. To free men from the tyranny of vampires. It has always been your purpose, since you first sprang from your mother's womb. And I have seen it emanating from your every pore since the night we first met. Shining from you as brightly as the sun. Do you think that it was some accident that brought us together? Do you think it was mere chance that the first vampire I sought to kill in more than a hundred years was the one who led me to you?

"I can see a man's purpose, Abraham. It is my gift. I can see it as clearly as I see you standing before me now. Your purpose is to fight tyranny…

"… and mine is to see that you win."

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

SEVEN

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

The Fatal First

I have now come to the conclusion never again to think of marrying, and for this reason; I can never be satisfied with anyone who would be blockhead enough to have me.

—Abraham Lincoln, in a letter to Mrs. Orville H. Browning
April 1st, 1838

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

I

Abe was on the second floor of a plantation house. He'd seen so many of them on his trips down the Mississippi—the oversize, four-columned wonders built by the hands of slaves. But he'd never been inside. Not until tonight.

I held Jack in my arms, his innards visible through the slit that ran across his belly. I saw the color leave his face… saw the fear in his eyes. And then the nothingness. My brave, sturdy friend. The roughest man in Clary's Grove. Gone. And yet I could not grieve him now—for I too remained perilously close to death.

It had been another simple errand, another name on Henry's list. But this place was different. Extraordinary. Abe was on his knees, certain he'd stumbled into some kind of vampire hive.

How many there were I did not know. I set Jack's body down and entered a long second-floor hallway, ax in hand, my long coat torn by the very claws that had taken my friend's life. Open doors ran the length of this corridor, and as I walked cautiously forward, each revealed a scene more horrid than the last. In one, the tiny bodies of three children hung from ropes by their ankles —their throats cut. Pails placed beneath them to catch their blood. In another, the withered, white-eyed corpse of a woman in a rocking chair. One of her skeletal hands rested atop the head of a child in her lap, not quite as decayed as she. Down the corridor… the remains of a woman lying in bed. Farther… a squat vampire with a stake through his heart. All the while I heard the sounds of the floors creaking around me. Above and below. I crept down the corridor… closer to the grand staircase at its end. On reaching its railing, I turned back to perceive the whole of the hallway. Suddenly there was a vampire before me—though I could not see his face against the light. He took the ax from my hand and threw it aside… lifted me clear off the ground by my collar. Now I saw his face.

It was Henry.

"It is your purpose to free men from tyranny, Abraham," he said. "And to do so, you must die." Upon this, he threw me over the railing. My body fell toward the foyer's marble floor. And fell. For all time.

It was the last nightmare Abe would ever have in New Salem.

It had taken him months to emerge from the crippling depression brought on by Ann's death—and while it had renewed his hatred of vampires, he found himself without the energy and passion to hunt them. Now, when a letter from St. Louis arrived in Henry's handwriting, it might go unopened for days (and once opened, it might be weeks before Abe attended to the name inside). Sometimes, if the errand required too much travel, he sent Jack Armstrong in his stead. His despondency is clear in an entry dated November 18th, 1836.

I have given too much of myself already. Henceforth, I shall hunt only when it is convenient for me to do so, and only because it honors the memory of my angel mother… only because it honors Ann's memory. I care not for the unsuspecting gentleman on the darkened city street. I care not for the Negro sold at auction, or the child taken from its bed. Protecting them has not profited me in the least. On the contrary, it has left me even poorer, for the items my errands require are furnished at my own expense. And the days and weeks spent hunting are days and weeks without a wage. If what Henry says is the truth—if I am truly meant to free men from tyranny—then I must begin by freeing myself. There is nothing for me here [in New Salem]. The store is failed, and I fear the village is not far behind. Henceforth my life shall be my own.

Abe had been encouraged to pursue law by his old Blackhawk War friend John T. Stuart, who had a small practice in Springfield. After studying entirely on his own (and only in his spare time), Abe obtained a law license in the fall of 1836. Shortly thereafter, Stuart asked him to partner up. On April 12th, 1837, the two men ran an advertisement in The Sangamon Journal announcing their new venture, located in Springfield at "Number Four Hoffman's Row, Upstairs." Three days later, Abe rode solemnly into Springfield on a borrowed horse, carrying everything he owned in a pair of saddlebags. He was twenty-eight years old, and he was penniless—"the whole of my money going toward my debts, and the requisite books of my new profession." He tied up outside A. Y. Ellis & Co., a general store on the west side of the square, "and moseyed in with not so much as an acorn in my pocket." The clerk was a slender man named Joshua Fry Speed, twenty-four years old, with jet-black hair and a "graceful" face that framed two "unnervingly" blue eyes.

I found him at once odd and bothersome. "Are you new to Springfield, sir? May I interest you in a hat, sir? What news from the county, sir? Must you routinely stoop to fit through doorways, sir?" Never had I been asked so many questions! Never had I been

so unwillingly dragged into conversation! I would not have dreamt of treating my customers in such a way during my own tenure as a clerk. I could not go from one shelf to the next without him buzzing about like a horsefly asking questions, when all I cared to do was conclude my business and be on my way. To this end, I handed him a list of goods—including the chemicals I required for my hunts.

"You will forgive my saying so," said Speed, "but these are strange requests indeed."

"They are what I require. I shall be glad to furnish you with the names of the—"

"Strange indeed—sir, are you certain we have not met?"

"Sir, are you able you order them or not?"

"Yes, I am sure of it! Yes… yes, I saw you give a speech July last at Salisbury! On the need for improving the Sangamon? Do you not remember, sir? Joshua Speed? A fellow Kentuckian?"

"I really must be on my—"

"A fine speech indeed! Of course, I believe you quite mistaken on the subject—every dollar spent on that miserable creek is a dollar wasted. But what a speech!"

He pledged to order the whole of my list at once, and (much to the relief of my weary ears) busied himself copying its contents. Before taking my leave, I inquired as to whether he knew of any rooms for rent—preferably cheap ones, as I had no money to pay at the moment.

"Well, sir… if you have no money, am I to take your meaning as 'cheap,' or 'free'?"

"On credit."

"Ah, 'credit,' yes… you will forgive my saying so, but I have learned that 'credit' is a French word meaning 'I shall never pay you.' "

"I square my debts."

"Oh, I doubt it not, I doubt it not. All the same, sir—you shall not find such a room in Springfield. People here are strangely accustomed to trading their wares for money."

"I see… well, thank you for your time. Good day."

Perhaps he pitied my circumstances or my weary countenance. Perhaps he was merely as friendless as I. In any case, he stopped me and offered to share his own room above the store "on credit—until such time as you are able to strike out on your own." I will admit that I considered refusing him. The idea of sharing a room with such a pestering fly! I should rather take my chances in a stable loft! But, having no better option, I thanked him and accepted.

“You will, of course, require time to move,” said Speed.

Abe walked outside. A moment later, he returned with his saddlebags and set them on the floor.

“I am moved.”

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

II

Springfield was booming. Wooden shacks and oxcarts were giving way to brick buildings and carriages, and there seemed to be two politicians for every farmer. It was a long way from New Salem—and even farther from the frontier hardship of Little Pigeon Creek. But for all the excitement and advantage of urban life, there also came a cruelty that Abe was unaccustomed to. His description of one incident is a window into the growing violence of a growing city, and further evidence of Lincoln's lingering melancholy.

I witnessed a woman and her husband shot and killed today —the latter being the responsible party in both deaths. I was on the street in front of our office, talking with a client, Mr. John S. Wilbourn, when I heard a scream and saw a woman of perhaps five-and-thirty years running out of Thompsons'. * A man came running after her with a pepperbox, ** leveled it, and shot her square in the back. She fell face forward in the street, grabbing at her gut, then rolled onto her back and made an effort to sit upright. She could not. Wilbourn and I raced toward her at once, caring not that her husband stood over her, pistol in hand. Others came into the street, alerted by the noise, and as they did they were met with the sound of a second shot. This one left a hole in the husband's head. He, too, fell—blood pouring from the wound with every beat of his heart.

It is a strange thing how quickly the body dies. How fragile a force our presence is. In an instant the soul is gone—leaving an empty, insignificant vessel in its stead. I have read of those sent to the gallows and gillotines [sic] of Europe. I have read of the great wars of ages past, and men slaughtered by the tens of thousands. And we give but fleeting consideration to their deaths, for it is our nature to banish such thoughts. But in doing so we forget that they were each as alive as we, and that one length of rope—one bullet or blade—took the whole of their lives in that last, fragile instant. Took their earliest days as swaddled infants, and their grayest unfulfilled futures. When one thinks of how many souls have suffered this fate in all of history—of the untold murders of untold men, women, and children… it is too much to bear.

Fortunately, Lincoln's duties as a lawyer and lawmaker kept

him too busy to dwell on death for very long. When he wasn't required at a committee hearing or a vote, he was likely deposing a client in his office, or filing a suit at the Springfield courthouse (most of his cases concerned land disputes or unpaid debts). Twice a year, Abe joined a group of his fellow lawyers on a three-month tour of the eighth Judicial Circuit, an area made up of fourteen counties in central and eastern Illinois. There were dozens of settlements on the circuit, and precious few courthouses. So when the weather permitted, the courthouse came to them, lawyers, judge, and all. For Abe, these trips were more than an escape from the long, candlelit hours at his desk. They were a chance to catch up on his vampire hunts.

Knowing that my work would take me twice yearly around the circuit, I deferred certain errands until such time as they were more suitable. By day my fellow lawyers and I tried cases, using churches or taverns as our courts. In the evenings we gathered at the supper table and discussed the business of the coming day. And at night, when all but a few were asleep in the overstuffed rooms of our boardinghouse, I ventured out with my coat and ax.

One hunt in particular stood out in Abe's memory:

I'd received a letter from Henry bearing the instructions: "E. Schildhaus. Half mile beyond the north end of Mill Street, Athens, Illinois." Rather than set out straightaway and dispense God's justice, I chose to wait until such time as my work brought me to Athens. And so arrived the day, two months later, when our traveling mob was due in the little town to the north, and the lawyers gathered at the tavern that was to serve as our courthouse. Here they were introduced to the plaintiffs and defendants whose cases they would argue in just a few hours' time. Having been sick most of the night before, I was unable to join Stuart until midday, by which time our case was already before the judge. It was a matter of some small debt owed by our client—an older red-haired woman named Betsy. I recall only that we lost, and that I contributed nothing to the effort beyond a parting, apologetic handshake with her—much distracted by my illness. That night, Stuart having turned in along with most of our mob, I unpacked my coat and ax and quietly made for the address on Henry's letter. As I was feeling feverish, I had elected to simply knock on the door and drive my ax into whoever opened it, so that I might return to bed with the utmost expediency. The door swung open.

It was my client, Betsy—her red hair held in place by an ivory comb. I closed my coat in hopes of hiding the ax beneath it.

"May I help you, Mr. Lincoln?"

"I—I apologize for intruding at this late hour, ma'am. I must be mistaken."

"Oh?"

"Yes, ma'am. I understood this to be the home of an E. Schildhaus."

"Indeed it is."

A vampire and a woman under one roof?

"Mr. Lincoln, you must excuse my asking, but are you well? You look rather pallid."

"Fine, ma'am, thank you. May I… do you think I might speak with Mr. Schildhaus a moment?"

"Mr. Lincoln," she said, laughing, "you are speaking with her."

E. Schildhaus…

Elizabeth…

Betsy.

She caught sight of the ax in my coat. Read my face. My eyes. My thoughts. At once I was on my back fighting to keep her fangs from my neck, my ax knocked out of reach. I pulled at her red hair with my right hand and reached into my coat with the left. Here I found a small knife, which I used to stab any part of her that I could reach: her neck, her back, the very arms she pinned me with. I brought the blade down again and again, until at last she released me and sprang to her feet. I did the same, and we circled each other cautiously—I holding the knife in front of my body; she staring at me with those black marbles. Then, just as quickly as she had attacked, she stopped… and held her hands in the air as if to surrender.

"I must know… what quarrel have we, Mr. Lincoln?"

"Your quarrel is with God. I merely wish to offer Him the opportunity to judge you."

"Very good," she laughed. "That is very good. Well, for your sake, I pray you are a better combatant than you are a lawyer."

She struck at me, and in doing so knocked the knife from my hand—my strength diminished by fever. Her fists flew about my face and belly faster than I could perceive them, and I tasted the salt of fresh blood in my mouth. She drove me back with each blow, until I could no longer keep my feet steady beneath me. For the first time since the night Henry had saved my life, I felt death looking over my shoulder.

Henry was wrong….

I collapsed, and she was on me at once—my arm shaking as I again held her by the hair. And then her fangs were in my shoulder. The pain of punctured flesh and muscle. The heat of

blood rushing to the wound. The pressure in my veins. I stopped pulling at her hair and laid my hand flat upon her head, as if comforting a friend in a time of grief. All apprehension left me now. All pain. The warmth of whiskey. An unknown joy.

These are the last moments of my life.

I struck the martyr against the ivory comb in her hair. It lit—brighter than the sun, a halo behind her head. Her red hair burst into flame and I felt her fangs leave me; heard her screams as she rolled on the ground—the fire spreading to her clothes, refusing to let her go. With the last of my strength, I got to my knees, retrieved my ax, and buried it in her brain. She was no more, but I had not the strength to bury her, or walk the mile to my boardinghouse. I dragged her body inside, closed the door, and—after helping myself to a torn strip of her bedsheets to dress my wounds—helped myself to her bed.

I do not expect I shall ever again have the opportunity of defending and murdering a client in the same day.

When Abe rode circuit, his hunts were confined to darkness. But when he worked out of Springfield, he grew increasingly fond of hunting during the day.

One of my favorite tricks was setting a sleeping vampire's house alight when the sun was highest in the sky. This left the devil with two unsavory options: meet me in the daylight, where he would be weak and half blind, or remain inside and burn. I cared not which he chose.

By the time Abe won reelection to the State Legislature in 1838, he was becoming known around Springfield as an eloquent speaker and capable lawyer. A man with ability and ambition to match. A man worthy of esteem. He was twenty-nine years old, and in just over a year's time, he'd gone from a penniless newcomer on a borrowed horse to a man who moved with the capital's elite (though thanks to his debts, he remained penniless). He charmed dinner party guests with his backwoods folksiness and impressed fellow legislators with his easy grasp of the issues. "His table manners are a bit rough," wrote fellow Whig Ebenezer Ryan to a friend, "and his suits in need of mending. But he is possessed of the finest mind I have ever known, and has a gift for forming his thoughts into eloquent turns of phrase. I expect he could be governor someday."

Abe also thought less often of Ann Rutledge.

It is true what they say of time. I find my melancholy much improved of late, and take to my errands with renewed zeal. Mother sends news that she and my half-siblings are in good health. * I have a fine partner in Stuart, a pestilent but well-

meaning friend in Speed, and the respect of the finest men in Springfield. Were it not for my debts, I should be the happiest of men. And yet I cannot escape the feeling that there is something missing.

John T. Stuart had a plan.

It had taken some convincing, but he'd finally managed to drag his junior partner to the cotillion at his cousin Elizabeth's.

Having much business to attend to, I did not think it a good use of my time. Yet Stuart kept at me—pestering me as [his stepbrother] John had years before. "Life is more than papers, Lincoln! Come now! It shall do our health wonders to be out among people." This continued for the better part of an hour, until I had no choice but relent. On reaching the Edwardses' house (before I'd so much as shaken the snow from my soles), Stuart whisked me through the house and introduced me to a young lady seated in the parlor. It was then that his scheme became clear.

Her name was Mary Todd—Stuart's cousin, and a new arrival to Springfield. Abe recorded his first impressions of her that very night, December 16th, 1839.

She is a fascinating creature, just this week turned one-and-twenty, but so gifted in conversation—and not in the stilted, learned manner of excessive breeding, but rather in a natural, God-given way. A tiny, witty thing with a pleasing round face and dark hair. Fluent in French; trained in dance and music. My eye could not help but return to her, time and time again. More than once I caught her staring back, her hand cupped to the ear of a friend—both laughing at my expense. Oh, I am keen to know her more! When the evening was all but concluded and I could bear it no longer, I greeted her with a low bow, saying "Miss Todd, I want to dance with you in the worst way."

Legend has it that Mary later told friends: "And he certainly did."

She was strangely drawn to the tall, unrefined lawyer. Despite the gulf of wealth and breeding that divided them, there were a few crucial similarities that would form the basis of their relationship: Both lost their mothers at a young age, and continued to be defined by that loss. Both were decisive, emotional creatures—prone to soaring highs and abyssal lows. And both enjoyed nothing more than a good joke (especially when it came at the expense of "some deserving charlatan"). As Mary would write in her diary that winter, "He is not the handsomest suitor I have ever known, nor the most refined—but he is without question the cleverest. Yet there is a sadness that

accompanies his wit. I find him quite strange… strange yet intriguing."

But as much as she was intrigued by Abe, Mary was torn, for she was already being courted by a short, stocky Democrat named Stephen A. Douglas. Douglas was a rising star in his party, and a man of considerable means, especially when compared to Lincoln. He could provide Mary with the lifestyle she'd grown accustomed to. But while he was undeniably brilliant and undeniably rich, he was also (in Mary's words) "undeniably dull."

"In the end," she recalled in a letter written years later, "I decided that it was more important to laugh than eat."

She and Abe became engaged in late 1840. But while the two were "in hearty love and a hurry to get hitched," there was still the small matter of getting permission from Mary's father. The young couple wouldn't have to wait long for his answer. Mary's parents were due in Springfield for Christmas. It was to be Abe's first encounter with his future in-laws.

Robert Smith Todd was a wealthy businessman and a fixture in Lexington, Kentucky, society. Like Abe, he was both lawyer and lawmaker. Unlike Abe, he'd amassed a great deal of wealth, some of which he'd used to purchase slaves for the mansion that he shared with his second wife and some of their fifteen children.

I am unnerved at the prospect of being judged by a man of such influence and accomplishments. What if he should think me a fool or a peasant? What then of our love? I can think of nothing else. It has given me no shortage of worry these two weeks.

Abe needn't have worried. The meeting went better than he could have hoped—at least according to the poem Mary dashed off to Lexington the next day, December 31st:

My darling Abe was at his best,
our darling father, most impressed.
The happy news (you might have guessed),
is that our union has been blessed!

As one post rider carried her poem to Lexington, another delivered a letter to her newly blessed fiancé. It was addressed "urgent" in Henry's unmistakable scrawl—and carefully worded (as all the letters that passed between him and Abe were) to avoid any direct mention of vampires lest it be delivered to the wrong hands.

Dearest Abraham,

Received your letter of 18th December. Please accept my heartiest congratulations on your engagement. Miss Todd seems to be possessed of many fine qualities, and judging by your lengthy description of each, you have clearly been possessed by

them.

However, I must caution you, Abraham, and I do so only after much deliberation—for I know that this letter will not come as welcome news. The woman to whom you are engaged is the daughter of a Mr. Robert Smith Todd, known to all of Lexington as a gentleman of means and might. But know the truth: that his power is built on treacherous ground. That he is more a friend to my kind than yours. That his allies are the very worst of us—the sort whose names I have sent you these many years. He has been their champion in the statehouse. Their private bank in matters of business. He has even profited from the sale of Negroes intended for that cruelest of fates.

It is not my intention to discourage you from the match, for the daughter cannot be held to account for the sins of the father. However, being so intimately connected with such a man could prove dangerous. I ask only that you give the matter serious consideration, and keep your wits about you—whatever your decision may be.

Yours ever,

—H

History would remember the next day as Lincoln's "fatal first" of January.

Well, it is done. I have destroyed the woman I love without so much as an explanation. I have destroyed her happiness and my own. I am the most miserable creature that ever lived, and I deserve whatever sorrows are in store. I expect—nay, I hope there will be many.

Abe had called on Mary that morning and broken off the engagement, muttering through his tears ("I recall not a word of it") before running out into the cold.

I knew that I would never be able to shake her father's hand again, nor look him in the eye without betraying my rage. To think that my children would share his blood! A man who conspired against his own kind! A man who profited from the deaths of innocents, their color be damned! I could not bear it. And what was I to do? Tell Mary the truth? Impossible. I had but one choice.

For the second time in five years, his thoughts turned to suicide. And for the second time in five years, it was his mother's dying wish that kept him from following through.

John T. Stuart was visiting with relatives. All but a few of his fellow legislators had left to welcome the New Year in their respective districts. There was only one person in all of Springfield whom Abe could turn to.

“But you are in love with her!” said Speed. “Why in the devil would you go and do such a stupid thing?”

Abe sat on his bed in the tiny room above A. Y. Ellis & Co.—the bed he shared with the half-mad “pestering fly” buzzing about the room.

“I ache to be with her, Speed… but I cannot.”

“On account of her father? The same man who gave you his blessing not—not six or eight days ago?”

“The same.”

“You ache to be with her… her father has given his blessing. You must explain how courtship works here in Illinois, for I have clearly misunderstood some part of it.”

“I have since learned that her father is a party to wickedness. That he keeps the worst kind of company. I can have none of it.”

“If I loved a woman as you love Mary, her father could dine with the devil himself and it would not alter my affections.”

“You do not understand….”

“Then make me understand! How can I be of any use if all you do is speak in riddles?”

Abe could feel it on the tip of his tongue.

“You can trust me to keep any secret, Lincoln.”

“When you say ‘dine with the devil,’ well… you are closer to the truth than you know. I say he keeps company of the worst kind. What I mean to say is… he is a friend of evil, Speed. A friend of creatures who care not for human life. Creatures who would kill you or me and feel all the remorse of an elephant who stepped on an ant.”

“Ah… you mean he is a friend of vampires.”

Abe felt the blood leave his fingertips.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

III

Joshua Speed had never felt at home with the other "well-bred boys" of St. Joseph's Academy. He liked to play pranks. Tell jokes. He liked to dream of life on the wild frontier, "where men were few and arrows flew." He couldn't stand the thought of suffering his father's quiet life of privilege. He yearned for something more—to strike out on his own and see the world. When he was nineteen, this yearning led him to Springfield, where he bought a stake in A. Y. Ellis. But filling orders and keeping inventory hadn't proved the "wild frontier" he was looking for.

In early 1841, not long after Abe's fatal first of January, Speed sold his interests and returned to Kentucky, leaving Lincoln to enjoy the room above the store by himself.

Arrived at Farmington. Must sleep.

It was August, and Abe had come to the Speed family's Kentucky estate, Farmington, for some much-needed time away from his troubles. He hadn't ventured out in months for fear of running into Mary or her friends, and his name was "treated as a profanity in every parlor in Springfield." Speed had written his old roommate and insisted he come for "as long as is necessary to heal your troubles."

Abe was more relaxed than he had been in years, or ever would be again. He took leisurely rides around the estate on horseback. Ventured into Lexington. Lazed afternoons away on the porch of the giant plantation house (the first he had actually set foot inside, his nightmares notwithstanding). If there was one drawback to life at Farmington, it was the inescapable sight of slaves. They were everywhere—in the house; in the fields.

Riding on the road to town today, I saw a dozen Negroes chained together like so many fish upon a trotline. It causes me no small discomfort to be among them. To be surrounded by them. Not only because I think their servitude a sin, but because they remind me of all that I wish to forget.

Abe and Joshua Speed talked the days away. They spoke of Britain's might; of the steam engine. And they spoke of vampires.

"My own father dealt with the devils, I am ashamed to say," said Speed. "They were hardly a secret among men of his stature,

and a poorly kept one in our home, my older brothers having been enlisted in his efforts to win their favor."

"So he sold Negroes to them?"

"The old and the lame, as a rule. He believed it a double blessing—a way to be rid of a useless slave and make a profit doing so. Once or twice he sold off a healthy buck, or a wench with child. Those fetched a higher price as they had more bl—"

"Enough! How can you speak of them so? Speak of men as cattle led to slaughter?"

"If I have given the impression that I take their murders lightly, I apologize. I do not, Abe. Nor have I ever. To the contrary, vampires are chief among the reasons that I never sought the warmth of my father's esteem, or mourned his passing with more than a few tears. How could I accept it, when I have heard the screams of men and women feasted upon to line his pockets? When I have seen the faces of those demons through the spaces between wooden planks? If I could banish it from my memory… if I could atone for what was done here, I would do so."

"Then atone for it."

Speed needed little convincing. He needed only be told that hunting vampires was both dangerous and thrilling, much like the wild frontier of his imagination. As I had with Jack, * I shared the whole of my knowledge—teaching him how and when to strike; sparring with him to build his poise. Like Jack, he was impatient, too eager to run headlong into the fight. But where Jack could rely on his strength to carry the day, the slender Speed could not. I tried to impress upon him the immense force and quickness possessed by vampires; how very close he would be to death. I feared he did not fully understand. Yet such was his eager spirit that I found myself once again excited at the prospect of hunting.

Abe came up with an audacious plan, one that would put his inexperienced friend at minimal risk and kill six birds with one stone. In late August, Joshua Speed wrote a letter to six of his father's former associates, each a frequent buyer of unwanted slaves. Each a vampire.

The day having arrived, I found myself filled with apprehension. How could I have been so rash? Six vampires! And with a novice as my partner! How I wished we had more time! How I wished we had Jack by our side!

But it was too late to turn back. Six men joined Joshua Speed on the shaded porch of the overseer's ** —one a gray-bearded man of seventy; one boyish and barely in his twenties; the other four in between. All of them wore dark glasses and carried folded

parasols.

Speed had arranged for several Negroes to gather near the house, and instructed them to “make merry with their gospel.” Such was their singing and clapping that one could hear little else while waiting on the porch outside. As we had planned, Speed invited the vampires in one by one, taking their money and leading them to the waiting feast inside.

Five can’t catch me and ten can’t hold me—ho, round the corn, Sally…

But it was I who waited with my ax—and on their rounding the corner from the hall to the parlor, I swung it at their throats with the whole of my strength (which, in those days, was considerable). Of the first five vampires, all but one had his head taken on the first try. Only the third required a second effort, the blade having lodged in his face instead of his neck.

I can bank, ginny-bank, ginny-bank the weaver—ho, round the corn, Sally…

The last vampire was the youngest in appearance, but elderly in spirit. He grew annoyed at being made to wait on the porch alone, and helped himself inside the house. Unfortunately he did so just as the head of his colleague rolled into the hall.

The boyish vampire ran to his waiting horse, jumped on its back without breaking stride, and galloped off.

Speed was first through the door. He jumped on the second horse, dug his heels in, and gave chase before I could even mount the third. It was an old-fashioned horse race now, and Speed rode reckless, standing on his stirrups and beating his foot against the animal’s belly. The vampire saw him gaining and did the same, but his horse was a good ten years slower. Speed pulled up alongside without so much as a pocketknife to stab him with or a pebble to throw.

Speed pulled his feet from the stirrups one at a time, held the horn of his saddle with two hands, and stood. With both horses in a full gallop, he jumped, grabbing the vampire and dragging him to the ground. Both men tumbled in the dirt as their horses sped on. Speed struggled to his feet, dizzy—the sun blinding. Before he’d had time to shake the dust from his ears, a fist knocked him ten yards through the air and onto his back. He gasped for breath and brought a hand to his face, where a gash had been opened on his left cheek. The sun was suddenly eclipsed by the shape of a vampire standing over him. “You ungrateful little cur,” he said. Speed felt his innards rattle as the vampire delivered a kick to his gut.

“Who do you suppose paid for all this land?”

Another kick. Another. Speed saw flashes of color with the pain; felt his mouth fill with a strange taste. He couldn't help but be sick.

The vampire grabbed him by the collar. "Your father would be ashamed," he said.

"I… c-certainly hope s-so… ," muttered Speed.

The vampire raised a clawed hand and prepared to bring it down on Speed's throat.

Fortunately the head of an ax burst through his chest before he had the chance.

As the vampire fell to his knees, grabbing helplessly at the blade, blood pouring from his mouth, Abe pulled up on his reins and dismounted. Quickly placing two hands on the handle and one foot on the vampire's back, he freed the ax, then delivered a fatal blow to the creature's skull.

"Speed," he said, rushing to his friend's side. "My God…"

"Well," said Speed, "I believe that's enough atonement for one day."

Abe found Springfield "lonesome and lifeless" upon his return. His time at Farmington had done wonders for his melancholy, "but with no friend to share my lonely hours, what difference if I be in the happiest or worst of moods?"

I care not that [Mary's father] is a scoundrel, only that I love his daughter unconditionally. Speed is right—what is there in the world but our own small happiness? I have given the matter my serious consideration. Let Henry protest. Let the consequences come. I have resolved to pledge myself anew if she will have me.

"And why should I marry the man who left me to suffer alone?" asked Mary as Abe stood in the doorway of her cousin's house. "The man who left me without so much as an explanation!"

Abe looked down at the hat in his hands. "I do not—"

"Who made a mockery of my name in this city!"

"My dearest Mary, I have only my humble—"

"Pray, what sort of husband would such a man make? A man who, at any moment, might suffer a change of heart and leave me to suffer anew? Tell me, Mr. Lincoln, what enticement have I to pledge myself to such a man?"

Abe looked up from his hat. "Mary," he said, "if it is my faults you wish to address, then we shall find ourselves standing here a week's time. I do not come to torment you further. I come to merely lay myself at your feet; to beg your forgiveness. I come with a pledge to spend my life reconciling whatever grief I have caused you these long months. If my offer is insufficient—if the

sight of me brings you anything other than happiness—then you may close that door knowing that my face shall never trouble you again."

Mary stood in silence. Abe took a small step back, expecting the door to be slammed in his face at any moment.

"Oh, Abraham, I love you still!" she cried, and leapt into his arms.

Their engagement resumed, Abe wasted no time. He bought two gold wedding rings (on credit, of course) at Chatteron's in Springfield. He and Mary settled on a simple engraving to grace the inside of both.

Love is Eternal

Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd were married on a rainy Friday evening on November 4th, 1842, in the home of Elizabeth Edwards, Mary's cousin. In all, there were fewer than thirty guests looking on as they exchanged vows.

After the ceremony, Mary and I stole away to the parlor while dinner was served, so that we might spend our first moments as husband and wife in quiet solitude. We shared a tender kiss or two, and looked at each other with a certain perplexity—for it was a strange thing to be married. A strange and wonderful thing.

"My darling Abraham," said Mary at last. "Do not ever leave me again."

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

IV

On May 11th, 1843, Abe wrote to Joshua Speed.

What a wonder these months have been, Speed! What bliss! Mary is as devoted and loving a wife as one could want, and I am pleased, Speed—so very pleased to share the happy news that she is with child! We are both overjoyed, and Mary has already begun the task of preparing our home for the arrival. What a fine mother she will make! Please write me immediately, for I wish to know how your recovery is progressing.

The evening of August 1st, 1843, was an unusually hot one, and the open window did little to relieve the heat in Abe and Mary's tiny second-floor room at the Globe Tavern. Passersby looked up at that open window with intense curiosity as sounds bled into the night air—first of a woman's pain, and then of a shrill cry.

A son! Mother and child in the best of health!

Mary has done perfectly. It is not six hours since the child's birth, and already she holds little Robert in her arms, singing to him sweetly. "Abe," she said to me as he fed, "look what we have done." I admit that tears filled my eyes. Oh, if only this moment could stretch on for all eternity.

Robert Todd Lincoln (Mary insisted; Abe held his tongue) was born a scant ten months after his parents' wedding day.

I find myself staring at him for hours on end. Holding him against my chest and feeling the gentle rhythms of his breath. Running my fingers over the smooth skin of his fat, delightful feet. I admit that I smell his hair when he sleeps. Nibble at his fingers when he holds them near. I am his servant, for I shall do anything to earn his slightest smile.

Abe took to parenthood with a passion. But two decades of burying loved ones had taken their toll. As the months went on and Robert grew, Abe seemed increasingly obsessed with losing his son, whether to sickness or some imagined accident. In his journal entries, he began to do something he hadn't in years: he began to bargain with God.

My only wish is to see him become a man. To have his own family gathered beside him at my grave. Nothing else. I shall happily trade every ounce of my own happiness for his. My own

accomplishments for his. Please, Lord, let no harm come to him. Let no misfortune befall him. If ever you require one to punish, I beg you—let it be me.

In accordance with his hopes of seeing Robert reach adulthood, and in hopes of preserving the happiness he'd found in married life, Abe came to a difficult decision in the autumn of 1843.

My dance with death must end. I cannot risk leaving Mary without a husband, nor Robert without a father. I have this very morning written Henry and told him that he should no longer count on my ax.

After twenty years of battling vampires, the time had come to hang up his long coat for good. And after eight years in the State Legislature, his moment to be recognized had come as well.

In 1846, he was nominated as the Whig candidate for the United States Congress.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

EIGHT

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

“Some Great Calamity”

The true rule, in determining to embrace, or reject any thing, is not whether it have any evil in it; but whether it have more of evil, than of good. There are few things wholly evil, or wholly good.

—Abraham Lincoln, in a speech in the House of Representatives

June 20th, 1848

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

I

When Abe retired from hunting in late 1843, he left one of Henry's errands unfinished.

I made innocent mention of this in letters to Armstrong and Speed, and (as had secretly been my hope) both expressed interest in completing it. Because they remained relative strangers to the art of hunting vampires, I thought it best if they worked together.

Joshua Speed and Jack Armstrong met for the first time in St. Louis on April 11th, 1844. If Speed's letter (to Abe, written three days later) is any indication, it didn't go well.

As your letter instructed, we met at the tavern on Market Street yesterday midday. Your description [of Armstrong] was precise, Abe! He is more bull than man! Broader than a barn and stronger than Samson himself! Yet you failed to mention that he is also a cur. As thick-skulled as he is thick. You must forgive my saying so, for I know he is your friend, but never in my thirty years have I encountered a more disagreeable, pugnacious, humorless man! It is obvious why you recruited him (for the same reason one recruits a big, dumb ox to pull a heavy cart). But why you—a man of the finest mind and temperament—would keep his company otherwise I shall never comprehend.

Armstrong never wrote about his impressions of Speed, but it's likely they were just as unflattering. The wealthy, dashing Kentuckian was spirited and chatty, qualities that Armstrong would have found irksome in the toughest of men. Speed, however, was soft-handed and slight, the very kind of "dandy" that the Clary's Grove Boys would have stuffed in a barrel and sent down the Sangamon.

Out of nothing more than respect for you, dear friend, we agreed to forgo our grievances and see the errand through.

Their target was a well-known professor named Dr. Joseph Nash McDowell, dean of medicine at Kemper College.

Henry had warned me [about McDowell]. The doctor was an "especially paranoid specimen," he'd said. Paranoid to the extent that he wore an armor breastplate beneath his clothes at all times, lest some assassin try to stake him through the heart. I related this to Armstrong and Speed, and added my own warning: because McDowell's "death" would likely cause a stir in St. Louis,

they must take care to remain unseen during the errand, and avoid making inquiries as to the doctor's whereabouts. To do either would be disastrous.

Armstrong and Speed did both.

The reluctant duo stood at the corner of Ninth and Cerre Streets that April afternoon, each in a conspicuous, bulging long coat, asking every man who entered the four-story medical building: "Sir, do you know where we might find Dr. Joseph McDowell?"

At last we were directed to a steep, circular lecture hall. A miniature coliseum of ever-expanding rows and railings, upon which curious gentlemen rested their hands, their faces illuminated by the hissing gaslights of the surgical table below, their eager eyes trained on the wild-haired, pale figure cutting into the flesh of a male corpse. We took our places on the uppermost level and watched Dr. McDowell remove the heart and hold it up for all to see.

"Banish all poetic notions from your minds," he said. "What I hold here knows nothing of love or courage. It knows only rhythmic contraction." McDowell squeezed the heart in his hand several times. "A single, beautiful purpose… to keep fresh, rich blood flowing to every corner of the flesh."

A vampire teaching anatomy to men! Can you imagine it, Abe? (I must say, I rather liked the fellow's cheek.)

He cut further into the corpse as his demonstration continued, removing and discussing organs until at last the dead man resembled a gutted fish. (Armstrong was rendered weak-kneed for the whole—I, on the other hand, found it all quite fascinating.)

The lecture ended "to the polite tapping of canes against railings," and McDowell's students filed out. All but two. After hurriedly gathering his instruments and papers, the doctor "made haste to a small door at the rear of his stage and disappeared." Armstrong and Speed followed.

FIG. 12.2 - IN AN UNDATED PHOTOGRAPH (CIRCA 1850), A GROUP OF SURGEONS EXAMINE THE HEART AND LUNGS OF AN UNIDENTIFIED MAN. THE FACT THAT HE'S WEARING RESTRAINTS SUGGESTS THAT HE'S STILL CONSCIOUS - AND THE FACT THAT HE'S WEARING DARK GLASSES SUGGESTS THAT HE'S A VAMPIRE.

We wound down a narrow stone stairway in complete darkness, feeling our way along the rough, wet walls until at last our hands met something smooth. I struck a match against my heel, and a black door appeared before us—the words J. N.

McDowell, M.D. Private in gold paint. Out came my pistol and Armstrong's crossbow. Out went the match. My heart presently took to its "single, beautiful" purpose with great enthusiasm—for we knew that a vampire waited on the other side of the dark.

Speed felt his way to the knob and pulled it quietly, quietly open…

Sunlight.

Here was a long, tall room with smooth walls. High above our heads, a row of small windows let in the soft light of late day, and framed the feet of passersby. To our right, a long table of caged rats, glass vessels, and silver instruments. Ahead, what appeared to be a body on a stone slab, covered by a white sheet. And to our left, Abe… to our left… naked corpses ran the length of the room, each on a narrow shelf, stacked one atop the other to a height of seven or eight feet.

We were in a morgue.

I'd expected to find the doctor waiting for us. To be attacked at once. But there was no trace of him. Armstrong and I moved slowly toward the slab, our weapons at the ready. Only now did I see the dark glass tubes running over our heads, running from the bodies on our left to the vessels on our right. Only now did I see the blood running into those vessels, kept warm by a row of tiny gas flames beneath.

Only now did I see the chests of these "corpses" moving with each shallow breath.

And here the whole horror of it struck me, Abe. For now I realized that these were all living men. Packed onto shelves as books in a library. Each given barely enough room for his chest to rise. Each kept fed through holes in their stomachs… drained. Too weak to move, too nourished to die. Each imprisoned by the creature whose whistling we suddenly heard from an adjoining room. Whistling… washing his hands in a water basin. Preparing, no doubt, to butcher the poor soul whose chest still rose and fell beneath that white sheet.

And at once our plan became clear.

McDowell returned wearing an apron and carrying his surgical instruments on a tray. He set these down, whistling all the while, and peeled back the white sheet.

This isn't the man I remember.

Armstrong sat bolt upright and fired his crossbow into the bastard's heart—his heart, Abe! I needn't tell you that the arrow merely bounced off with a clang, for the big, dumb ox had forgotten about the breastplate!

It was a costly mistake, Abe, for McDowell now revealed his

true self and struck with his claws. Jack heard something clang against the stone floor. He looked down at where his crossbow had been a moment before. Neither it nor his right hand remained. His face went pale at the sight of blood running from his wrist—and his severed hand upon the floor.

Jack's cries were loud enough to wake some of the barely living on the opposite shelves.

I had no choice but to remove from hiding and fire my pistol at the vampire's head. But my shaking hands could not be trusted. The bullet sailed past him and into his precious glass vessels! Imagine the noise, Abe! Imagine the volume of blood that ran onto the stone floor! One might have drowned! Such was the delicacy of his creation that all of the overhead tubes now shattered in unison, the effect being a shower of blood from above.

"No!" screamed McDowell. "You've ruined it!"

I do not remember being struck. I only know that I was thrown into the shelves of bodies with enough force to break the bones of my right leg. The pain was more severe than any I had ever known—more severe even than the thrashing I'd received at Farmington. The whole of my body felt suddenly cold. I remember McDowell (a pair of him, actually, for I had been rendered rather senseless by the blow) coming toward me as I lay helpless, the entire floor covered by an inch or more of blood. I remember the strange, amusing thought that a mortuary was as good a place to die as any… the warmth pouring down on all of us… the taste of it. And I remember McDowell suddenly grabbing at his face.

The tip of an arrow had broken through the flesh beneath his right eye! The rest protruded from the back of his skull. Behind him, the big, dumb ox held a shaking crossbow in his remaining hand.

With an unnatural volume of blood rushing down his face (adding to the already grizzly scene), the paranoid McDowell panicked and fled. *

God be praised, we were but steps from the finest hospital in St. Louis. Armstrong and I helped each other up the stairs (I struggling along on my good leg, and carrying his severed hand in one of mine), both of us soaked from head to toe in the blood of two dozen men.

The surgeons were able to save Jack's life. His hand is gone forever, Abe. He was quite close to death. Closer than he will likely admit. It was his strength that saw him through. His strength, and the prayers you doubtless said for our safety. I shall

stay on long enough to see him well (though he refuses to speak to me). I am just now told that my leg shall heal, and that I shall walk with only the slightest limp, if any. Grieve not for your dear Speed, friend—for he counts himself the most fortunate fool alive.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

II

On August 3rd, 1846, Abe was elected to the United States House of Representatives. In December of 1847, well over a year after his election, Abe arrived in Washington with his family for the beginning of his term. They took a small room at Mrs. Sprigg's boardinghouse * —a room made all the more cramped by the addition of a fourth family member.

We are doubly blessed with another boy, Edward Baker, born this 10th of March [1846]. He is every bit the laughing rascal Bob is, though I suspect he has a sweeter disposition. My love is not diminished slightly at his being the second. I am every bit the servant of Eddy's smile—nibbling at his toes to make him laugh… smelling his hair when he sleeps… holding his sleeping chest to mine. What a simpleton these boys make of their father!

This time there was no fear of Edward falling ill or dying. No bargaining with God (at least none that Abe saw fit to record in his journal). Perhaps he'd grown more confident as a parent. Perhaps he was simply too busy to obsess over it. Busy keeping tabs on his thriving law practice back in Springfield. Busy adjusting to a new city and a new level of political intensity. Busy with everything but hunting vampires.

[Henry's] letters arrive monthly. He begs I reconsider. Insists that it is crucial I take up my errands again. I answer each one with the same simple truths: that I will not risk leaving my wife a widow, or my children fatherless. If I am truly meant to free men from tyranny, I tell him, then I must do so in the spirit of that old adage concerning the pen and the sword. My sword has done its part. My pen must take me the rest of the way.

Washington turned out to be a disappointment on nearly every level. Abe had come expecting a gleaming metropolis filled with men of the "finest minds, and dedicated to the service of their constituents." What he found were "a few brilliant beacons in a fog of fools." As for his dreams of life in a big city, Washington, D.C., felt more like Louisville or Lexington—albeit with a handful of gleaming architectural wonders. "A few palaces on a prairie," as Abe liked to say. The cornerstone of the Washington Monument had yet to be laid. Neither it nor the Capitol would be completed in his lifetime.

One of Washington's greatest disappointments was its abundance of slaves. They worked at Mrs. Sprigg's boardinghouse where Abe stayed with his family. They were auctioned off on the streets he took to work. They were kept caged on the future site of the National Mall, where Abe's giant likeness would one day keep watch for all eternity.

[There is] in view from the windows of the Capitol a sort of livery stable, where droves of Negroes are collected, temporarily kept, and finally taken to Southern markets, precisely like droves of horses. Men—chained together and sold! Here, in the shadow of an institution founded on the promise that "All men are created equal"! Founded with cries of "give me liberty, or give me death!" It is more than any honorable man can bear.

In one of the few highlights of his congressional career, Abe introduced a bill to outlaw slavery in the District of Columbia. He'd been careful to write it in such a way that "it seemed neither severe to slave owners, nor feeble to abolitionists." But there was only so much a first-term Congressman could do, brilliant or not. The bill never came to a vote.

His legislative failures notwithstanding, Abraham Lincoln made quite an impression in the halls of Congress—and not just because of his towering height. His contemporaries described him as "awkward and gangly," with pantaloons that "scarcely came to within six inches of his ankles." Though he was not yet forty, many Democrats (and a few of his fellow Whigs) took to calling him "Old Abe" on account of his "rough, ragged appearance and tired eyes."

I related this to Mary one night while she bathed our boys, and confessed that it annoyed me. "Abe," she said with nary an upward glance or moment's hesitation, "one might find men in Congress who possess twice your good looks, but not one who possesses half your good sense."

I am a fortunate man.

But unflattering nicknames were the least of his concerns, as he wrote only days after taking office:

A man cannot walk from one end of the chamber to the other without hearing talk of vampires! Never have I heard the subject so often discussed, and by so many! These long years I have thought myself privy to some dark secret—a secret I have kept hidden from my wife and kin. Yet here, in the halls of power, it is the secret everyone seems to know. Many in our delegation are rife with whispers about "those damned Southerners" and their "black-eyed" friends. Jokes are told over meals. Even [Senator Henry] Clay * participates! "Why does Jeff Davis wear his collar

so high? To hide the bite marks on his neck." There must be some truth in their jests, however, for I have yet to hear of a Southern congressman who isn't beholden to vampire interests, sympathetic to their cause, or fearful of their reprisal. As to my own experiences with [vampires], I shall remain silent. It is a part of my life that I do not wish to visit again—whether in practice or conversation.

Abe was startled awake by shattering glass.

A pair of men had broken through the windows of our second-floor room. There was no pistol under my pillow. No ax beside my bed. Before I had time enough to stand, one of them struck my face with such force that the back of my skull splintered our headboard.

Vampires.

I struggled to regain my senses as one of the devils grabbed Mary, covering her mouth to stifle the screams. The other took Bob from his small bed, and the creatures made off the way they came—out the windows and onto the street below. I willed myself upright and gave chase, leaping from the window without hesitation, tearing my flesh on shards of glass as I did. On the dark, scarcely peopled streets of Washington now. I could hear Bob's screams ahead of me in the dark. I ran after them with a panic I had never known. A rage.

I'll tear you to goddamned pieces when I catch you….

The tears in my eyes… the uncontrollable grunts… the torn muscles of my legs. Block after block, turning onto this street, that street, as Bob's voice changed direction. But his screams grew ever fainter on the wind, and my legs ever weaker. I collapsed… weeping at the thought of my son—my helpless little boy carried off into that darkness—that darkness where not even his daddy could reach him.

Abe lifted his trembling head, astonished to find himself in front of Mrs. Sprigg's boardinghouse.

And now… now a terrible thought came over me, and the panic returned.

Eddy…

I bounded up the stairs and into our room. Silence… empty beds… broken windows… curtains fluttering—and Eddy's crib against the far wall. I could not see its contents from here. I could not bear to look. What if he was gone?

I beg you, Lord….

How could I have left him? How could I have abandoned my ax? No… no, I could not look—I could only stand in the doorway, weeping—for I knew in my heart he was dead like the others.

And then his cries rang out, thank God, and I hurried across the room, eager to feel his warmth in my arms. But upon reaching his crib and looking down into it, I saw his white sheets awash in blood. Not Eddy's blood—no, for there was a demon lying there in his place. Lying atop those soaked sheets with a stake through his heart and a hole in the back of his skull. Lying motionless in the crib, the blood pouring from his familiar body… at once a child and a man. His weary eyes open, yet empty. Staring into mine. I knew him.

It was me.

Abe woke—his heart pounding. He turned to his left and saw Mary sleeping peacefully beside him. Checked his sleeping boys and found them unharmed.

He scribbled four words in his journal that night before trying (unsuccessfully) to go back to sleep.

This city is death.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

III

Abe shared the warmth of Mrs. Sprigg's fireplace with an old acquaintance on a February night in 1849.

[Edgar Allan] Poe has been in Baltimore these few weeks, and with Mary and the boys departed for Lexington, I thought it time for a reunion.

They'd kept up a sporadic correspondence over the years: occasional praise for Poe's stories and poems; congratulations on Lincoln's election victories. But tonight, face-to-face for the first time in twenty years, they spoke only of vampires.

I told Poe of Henry; of my hunts and the terrible truths they have led me to. He told me of his abiding obsession with vampires—that he has befriended an immortal named Reynolds, and is close to uncovering a "sinister plot" of some sort. He speaks with great enthusiasm and assuredness, yet it is difficult to believe most of what he says, for it is said through the mask of drunkenness. He looks weary. Aged by whiskey and bad luck. The years since our last meeting have not been kind. His dear wife has departed this earth, and success has not rewarded him with riches.

"Men kept on the edge of death!" said Lincoln. "Stored as living barrels in a cellar—their precious blood kept warm by gas flames. Are there no limits to a vampire's evil?"

Poe smiled and took another drink.

"You have heard of the Blood Countess, I presume?" he asked.

Abe's face made it clear that he hadn't.

"You?" asked Poe. "With all of your gallivanting around chasing vampires? Then I beg you indulge me a moment, for she is a favorite of mine—and an important piece of our country's history.

"Elizabeth Báthory was the jewel of Hungarian nobility," said Poe. "Beautiful; wealthy beyond compare. Her only burden was sharing a bed with a man she did not love—a man to whom she had been promised since her twelfth year: Count Ferenc Nádasdy. He was a generous husband, however, and allowed Elizabeth to indulge her every whim. Unbeknownst to him, her favorite indulgence was a dark-haired, fair-skinned woman named Anna

Darvulia. The two became lovers. It is unclear when—"

"Two women… lovers?"

"A trivial detail. It is unclear when Elizabeth learned that Anna was a vampire, or when she became one herself, but the pair were nonetheless eager to begin eternity together. Upon the count's mysterious death in 1604, the lovers began to lure young peasant girls to Čachtice Castle * with promises of employment; with money for their starving families. In truth, these girls were meant to be the playthings of lesser gods… to be robbed of their blood and their lives. In all, Elizabeth and Anna would kill more than six hundred girls in three years' time."

"My God…"

"Ah, but it is worse, for the pair seemed to pride themselves on crafting the most gruesome, the most degrading, the most painful methods of murder. Girls were tortured. Ravaged. Consumed for days at a time. Some were suspended above the floor by hooks through their arms and legs. Elizabeth and Anna would lie beneath, using knives to make tiny cuts in the girl's skin, letting her blood drip slowly over their bodies as they made love below. Some girls were partially crucified, their hands nailed to wooden—"

"I beg you be done with this, Poe. It is too much."

"At last, the peasants would tolerate no more, and the castle was stormed. Inside, the mob found a dungeon filled with iron cages. Half-dead victims with bites taken from their arms and stomachs. Girls whose hands and faces had been held over flames until they were blackened to the bone. But no trace of the vampires. A trial was staged, and a pair of innocent women cast into a pit of fire to appease the peasantry. But the real Elizabeth Báthory and Anna Darvulia had escaped.

"The horrors, Lincoln… the horrors that these women were able to inflict in such a short time… the efficiency and imagination with which they murdered… there is a beauty in it. One cannot help but admire them."

"It is vile," said Lincoln.

"Surely life has taught you that a thing can be both beautiful and vile."

"I was promised 'an important piece of our country's history.' Pray, is there some lesson in this unpleasantness, or do you merely take pleasure in tormenting an old friend?"

"The lesson, old friend, is this: Elizabeth Báthory is, in some measure, to blame for the many vampires we enjoy here in America."

Now Poe had Abe's attention.

“Word of her atrocities spread through Europe,” he said. “Rumors of a vampire Blood Countess and the hundreds of girls she slaughtered. In the space of ten years, centuries of whispered superstitions turned to open hatred. Never had a story caused such fervor! Gone forever were the days of accepting vampires as a cost of life, and gone was the fear of challenging them. Vampire hunters began to appear from England to Croatia, learning from one another, chasing the undead across the continent. Chasing them into the stinking sewers and diseased slums of Paris. Chasing them down the dark alleys of London. Vampires, reduced to sleeping in crypts. Reduced to drinking the blood of stray dogs. Lions hunted by sheep! It had become intolerable to be a vampire in Europe. They wanted freedom. Freedom from persecution. From fear. And where could such freedoms be found?”

“In America.”

“In America, Lincoln! America was a paradise where vampires could exist without fierce competition over blood. A place where it was common for families to have five, or eight, or a dozen children. They loved its lawlessness. Its vastness. They loved its remote villages and its ports brimming with the newly arrived. But more than anything, Lincoln, they loved its slaves. For here, unlike any other country fit for civilized men—here was a place they could feed on the intoxicating blood of man without fear of reprisal!

“When the English came to our shores, charged with bringing us back under the control of the Old World, America’s vampires took up the fight. They were there at Lexington and Concord. They were there at Ticonderoga and Moore’s Creek. Some returned to their native France, where they persuaded King Louis to lend us his navy. They are as American as you or I, Lincoln. True patriots—for America’s survival is their survival.”

“I have heard them discussed in the Capitol,” Abe whispered. “Even there, one sees their influence.”

“It is everywhere, Lincoln! And it shall only deepen, as it did for so many centuries in Europe. How long can it endure? How many vampires can cross our shores before the common man takes note of them? And what then? Do you think the good people of Boston or New York would be content to live with vampires for their neighbors? Do you believe that all vampires possess the same agreeable disposition as your Henry or my Reynolds?

“Imagine, Lincoln. Imagine what might have happened in Europe had there been no America for vampires to flee to. How long would the lions have allowed the sheep to hunt them? How

long before they began to behave like lions again?"

Abe didn't like the picture forming in his mind.

"I tell you," said Poe, "some great calamity awaits us."

For Poe, at least, it proved an ominous prediction.

On October 3rd, 1849, less than eight months after his reunion with Abe, Poe was discovered wandering the streets of Baltimore, half dead, confused, and wearing clothes that weren't his own. He was hurried to the Washington College Hospital, where doctors tried to diagnose his worsening illness.

Patient suffers from high fever and delusions. Calls out for a "Reynolds" when he is conscious. Symptoms similar to typhoid, though the rapid progression suggests some other underlying cause. His case is hopeless.

On Sunday, October 7th, at five o'clock in the morning, Poe woke with a start. He uttered the words "Lord help my poor soul" and passed away.

FIG. 7-C - EDGAR ALLAN POE POSES WITH ABRAHAM LINCOLN IN MATHEW BRADY'S WASHINGTON, D.C. STUDIO - FEBRUARY 4TH, 1849.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

IV

March 5th, 1849, brought an end to Abe's brief, unmemorable congressional career. He'd chosen not to run for a second term.

Being elected to Congress… has not pleased me as much as I expected. I have neglected my dear wife and rascals terribly these two years, and there is nothing in Washington to tempt me from returning to Illinois.

He returned to Springfield and dove headfirst into his law practice, apprenticed by a thirty-year-old lawyer named William H. Herndon (who would go on to write a comprehensive, controversial biography of Lincoln after his assassination). Abe took great care to keep the truth of his dark past away from his young partner.

He wrote letters of recommendation for friends seeking appointments. He argued cases across Illinois. He wrestled with his boys and took long walks with his wife.

He lived.

No more talk of men with fangs,

Or lives that never cease.

I only long for simple things,

I only long for peace.

He wouldn't get it.

Eddy Lincoln was three years, ten months, and eighteen days old when he died.

From an entry dated February 1st, 1850, only hours after his son's passing:

I lost my little boy… I miss him very much.

There is no joy in this life….

There's no reason to suspect that Eddy's death had anything to do with vampires. He'd been sick since December (probably with tuberculosis) and wasted away gradually, his mother keeping a vigil by his bed, rubbing balm on his little chest to no avail.

Mary could not bear to let Eddy die in his bed alone. She held his unconscious body to her own, cradling our little boy against her chest, rocking him through the night… until he was gone.

Mary would never be the same. Though she would bury two more sons, nothing would ever match the grief of losing her beloved "Angel Boy." Three days after his death, she hadn't eaten, or slept, or stopped crying.

[Mary] is inconsolable. It is just as well, for I am of no mind to console. Sent word to Speed and Armstrong requesting they come. Received a letter from Henry expressing his condolences, and his promise to arrive [in Springfield] no later than tomorrow midday. How he learned of Eddy's passing, I do not know.

Eddy was laid to rest in Hutchinson's Cemetery, just a few blocks away from Abe and Mary's house.

I held on to Bob and Mary for the whole of the service, the three of us weeping. Armstrong and Speed stood at our side, as did many friends and well-wishers. Henry watched from a distance, not wanting to cause me any added grief by raising Mary's suspicions. * However, he saw to it that I received a note before the service. In it were his further condolences… and a reminder that there was another way.

A way to see my boy again.

Despite what must have been a maddening temptation to see his little boy again, Abe surrendered to reason.

He would be small forever. An angelic murderer. I could not bear the thought of keeping him locked away in the dark. Of teaching him to kill so that he might live. I could not condemn my son to hell.

Mary wrote a poem (possibly with Abe's assistance), which was published in the Illinois State Journal around the time of Eddy's burial. The final line is engraved on his tombstone.

Those midnight stars are sadly dimmed,
That late so brilliantly shone,
And the crimson tinge from cheek and lip,
With the heart's warm life has flown—
The angel of Death was hovering nigh,
And the lovely boy was called to die.
The silken waves of his glossy hair
Lie still over his marble brow,
And the pallid lip and pearly cheek
The presence of Death avow.
Pure little bud in kindness given,
In mercy taken to bloom in heaven.
Happier far is the angel child
With the harp and the crown of gold,
Who warbles now at the Savior's feet
The glories to us untold.

Eddy, meet blossom of heavenly love,
Dwells in the spirit-world above.
Angel Boy—fare thee well, farewell
Sweet Eddy,
We bid thee adieu!
Affection's wail cannot reach thee now
Deep though it be, and true.
Bright is the home to him now given…
Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

NINE

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

At Last, Peace

We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us.

—Abraham Lincoln, proclaiming a National Fast Day
March 30th, 1863

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

I

From the New York Tribune, Monday, July 6th, 1857:
VIOLENT CLASHES TERRORIZE CITY
Curious Sightings in Gang Brawl
by H. Greeley

The savage clashes which laid siege to much of Manhattan these two days and nights have at last been quieted. By order of the Governor, militiamen entered the Five Points late Sunday and engaged the remaining combatants with volley upon volley of musket fire. Untold numbers of dead could this morning be seen lining Baxter, Mulberry and Elizabeth Streets—victims of the worst rioting this or any city has seen in memory. The violence seems to have begun when those notorious Five Points gangs, the Plug Uglies and Dead Rabbits, sprung an attack against their shared enemy, the Bowery Boys. It is the opinion of the [police] that the killings began on Bayard Street around Saturday midday, before spreading through the Five Points with all the rapidity and ferocity of a fire.

The innocent were forced to barricade their doors as rival thugs stabbed, shot and bludgeoned one another to death in the streets. Merchants saw their shops destroyed; their wares brazenly stolen in the chaos. Eleven passersby—a woman and child among them—were mauled for no cause but their straying too close to the fight.

CURIOUS SIGHTINGS IN GANG BRAWL

The Tribune was inundated with testimonies of “strange” and “impossible” feats throughout Saturday evening and Sunday morning. Men were said to leap across rooftops “as if carried by the air” in pursuit of one another; climb the sides of buildings “as effortlessly as a cat climbs a tree.”

One witness, a merchant by the name of Jasper Rubes, claims to have seen a Dead Rabbit “lift a Bowery Boy above his head and throw him against the second story of [a Baxter Street factory] hard enough to leave a hole in the bricks.” Incredibly, the victim “landed on his feet,” said the witness, “and kept up the fight as if nothing had happened.”

“His eyes,” said Rubes, “were black as soot.”

Hunting vampires was the furthest thing from Abraham

Lincoln's mind in the early 1850s.

Ten months after burying their son, Abe and Mary welcomed another. They named him William "Willy" Wallace Lincoln in honor of the physician who'd stayed at Eddy's side until the end. In 1853, they welcomed one more boy, Thomas "Tad" Lincoln, born April 4th. Along with ten-year-old Robert, the three formed a "boisterous brood."

"Bob howls in the next room as I write this," Abe said in an 1853 letter to Speed. "Mary has whopped him for running off and disappearing. I suspect that by the time I finish this letter he will have run off and disappeared again."

Abe made very few journal entries in the wake of Eddy's death. Those six and a half little leather-bound books had become a record of his life with vampires—a record of weapons and vengeance; of death and loss. But those days were behind him now. That life was over. After his entries had resumed in 1865, Abe looked back on that "last, peaceful, wonderful spell."

They were good years, to be sure. Quiet years. I wanted nothing more of vampires or politics. To think of all that I had missed whiling away the hours in Washington! How much of Eddy's brief, beautiful life had escaped my notice! No… never again. Simplicity! That was the oath I swore now. Family! That was my errand. When I could not be with my boys at home, I let them run about the office (much to Lamon's * consternation, I suspect). Mary and I took lingering walks, regardless of the season or weather. We spoke of our dear boys… of our friends and futures… of the speed with which the whole of our lives had passed.

There were no letters from Henry. No visits or hints of his whereabouts. At times I wondered if he had finally come to accept that I would hunt no more—or if he himself had fallen prey to the ax. Whatever the reason behind his absence, I was glad for it. For while I had come to regard him with tremendous affection, I loathed every memory the mere mention of his name conjured up.

Abe's long coat, riddled with the rips and scars of battle, was unceremoniously burned. His pistols and knives were locked in a trunk and forgotten in the cellar. The blade of his ax was allowed to rust. The specter of death, which had hung over the old vampire hunter since his ninth year, seemed at last to be lifting.

It returned briefly in 1854, when Abe received word from a friend in Clary's Grove that Jack Armstrong was dead. From a letter to Joshua Speed:

The damned fool's gotten himself killed by a horse, Speed.

Old Jack stood in an early winter [downpour], trying to drag the stubborn beast by its lead. For nearly an hour they tugged against each other. Jack (ever the Clary's Grove Boy) didn't think to fetch his coat or holler for help, despite his being one-handed and soaked to the bone. By the time he got the animal out of the rain, Jack had caught his death. He burned a fever for a week, slipped away, and died. It seems an ignoble end to such a sturdy man, does it not? A man who survived so many brushes with death? Who saw the terrible things you and I have seen?

In the same letter, Abe admitted to being "unnerved" by his "lack of anguish" over Armstrong's passing. He grieved, sure. But this was a "different sort of grief," unlike the crippling depression that had followed his mother's death, Ann's, and Eddy's.

I fear that a life of death has made me numb to both.

Four years later, Abe would defend Jack's son, "Duff" Armstrong, when he stood trial for murder. Abe refused payment. He worked tirelessly, litigated passionately, and (with a stroke of legal brilliance) won Duff his freedom, * a final thank-you to a brave friend.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

II

The same year that saw Abe mourn the loss of an old friend saw him dragged back into politics by an old rival.

Abe had known Senator Stephen A. Douglas since they were both young Illinois state legislators (and eager suitors of Mary Todd). Though a Democrat, Douglas had long been opposed to allowing slavery into territories where it didn't already exist. But in 1854, he suddenly reversed himself and championed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, a bill that repealed the federal ban on the spread of slavery. President Franklin Pierce signed it into law on May 30th, enraging millions of Northerners and stirring up long-simmering tensions on both sides of the issue.

Try as I might, I could not ignore my anger. It seeped into my mind as water is drawn into the roots of a tree, until at last it permeated the whole of my being. Sleep provided no refuge, for I was nightly visited by a sea of black faces, each the nameless victim of a vampire. Each of them crying out to me. "Justice!" they cried. "Justice, Mr. Lincoln!"

That [slavery] existed at all was insult enough. That I knew the institution to be doubly evil made it all the worse. But this! The idea of slavery's diseased fingers reaching farther north and west! Reaching into my own Illinois! It would not stand. I had retreated from politics, but when asked to debate [Douglas] on the issue, I could not refuse. Those ghostly faces would not permit me to.

On October 16th, 1854, Lincoln and Douglas squared off in front of a large Peoria, Illinois, crowd. A reporter with the Chicago Evening Journal described his amazement at witnessing Abe speak.

His face [began] to light up with the rays of genius and his body to move in unison with his thoughts. His speaking went to the heart because it came from the heart.

"I cannot but hate it!" said Mr. Lincoln of the proposal. "I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself!"

I have heard celebrated orators who could start thunders of applause without changing any man's opinion. Mr. Lincoln's eloquence was of the higher type, which produced conviction in others because of the conviction of the speaker himself.

“I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world!” he continued. “Enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites!”

His listeners felt that he believed every word he said, and that, like Martin Luther, he would go to the stake rather than abate one jot of it. In such transfigured moments as these he was the type of the ancient Hebrew prophet as I learned that character at Sunday school in my childhood.

Though it failed to sway Douglas or his allies in Congress, the speech would nonetheless prove a turning point in Abe’s political life. His anger over the slavery issue (and by extension, the vampire issue) had nudged him back into the political arena. His genius and eloquence that night in Peoria would ensure that he never left it again. The speech was transcribed and reprinted across the North. The name Abraham Lincoln began to take on national significance among the opponents of slavery. In the years to come, one of its passages would prove eerily prophetic.

“Is it not probable that the contest will come to blows, and bloodshed? Could there be a more apt invention to bring about collision and violence, on the slavery question, than this?”

Senator Charles Sumner lay unconscious on the Senate floor, facedown in a pool of his own blood.

The abolitionist had been attacked by a thirty-seven-year-old congressman named Preston Smith Brooks, a proslavery South Carolinian who’d taken offense at the Massachusetts senator’s mocking of his uncle in an antislavery speech two days earlier. On May 22nd, 1856, Brooks entered the Senate chamber accompanied by a fellow South Carolina congressman named Laurence Keitt and approached Sumner at his writing desk. “Mr. Sumner,” said Brooks, “I have read your speech twice over carefully. It is a libel on South Carolina, and Mr. Butler, who is a relative of mine.” Before Sumner had a chance to reply, Brooks began to beat his head with his gold-tipped cane, opening new gashes with each blow. Blinded by his own blood, Sumner staggered to his feet before collapsing. His victim now unconscious and bleeding, Brooks continued to strike until his cane broke in two. As horrified senators rushed to Sumner’s aid, they were held back by Keitt, who brandished a pistol and yelled, “Let them be!”

The blows fractured Sumner’s skull and vertebrae. He would live but wouldn’t be able to return to his Senate duties for three years. When South Carolinians heard of the attack, they sent Brooks new canes by the dozen. *

I am more assured than ever of my being wise to leave

Washington, and more certain than ever that it is a repository of idiots—just as I am certain that we are now on a course for the "great calamity" Poe warned of those long years ago. One can see the masts of an angry fleet on the horizon, and every week seems to bring them a mile closer. If, as many think, it is the winds of war that fill their sails, then it is a war I am content to let others fight. My boys are healthy. My wife is in good spirits. And we are a long, long way from Washington. I am happy to make a speech or two; happy to lend my pen where it is needed. But I am happy. And happiness, I have decided, is a noble ambition. I have lost too much already, and have been a slave to vampires these thirty years. Let me now be free. Let me now seek the enjoyment of whatever time God may grant me. And if this peace be merely prelude to some peril or other, so be it. I shall enjoy the peace.

There was no shortage of passion or violence on either side of the slavery issue. Infuriated by the attack on Charles Sumner, a radical abolitionist named John Brown led an attack on a settlement at Pottawatomie Creek, in the Kansas Territory. On the night of May 24th, 1856 (just two days after Sumner was beaten), Brown and his men brutally murdered five proslavery settlers, dragging each man from his home, running him through with a sword, and firing a bullet into his skull for good measure. It was the first in a series of reprisals that would be dubbed Bleeding Kansas. The violence would continue for three years and claim over fifty lives.

On March 6th, 1857, the Supreme Court pushed the country closer to the brink.

Dred Scott was a sixty-year-old slave who'd been trying to win his freedom in the courts for more than a decade. Between 1832 and 1842, he'd traveled with his master (U.S. Army Major John Emerson) through the free territories of the North, acting as a personal valet. During these travels, Scott married and had a child (all on free soil), and upon the major's death in 1843, tried to buy his freedom. But the major's widow refused, continuing to hire him out and pocketing the wages for herself. Advised by abolitionist friends, Scott sued for his freedom in 1846, on the grounds that he'd ceased to be property the moment he'd set foot in free territory. The case worked its way through the courts, attracting national attention before finally reaching Washington in 1857.

In a 7–2 decision, the Supreme Court ruled against Scott, arguing that the Founding Fathers had considered Negroes "beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race" when they drafted the Constitution. Consequently,

Negroes couldn't be citizens of the United States, and couldn't bring suit in federal court to begin with. They had no more right to due process than the plows they drove.

It was a devastating outcome for Scott, but it had implications far beyond his personal freedom. In issuing its ruling, the Court declared that:

Congress had exceeded its authority when it banned slavery from spreading to certain territories—and that these territories had no power to ban slavery on their own. Slaves and their descendants (whether free or not) were not protected by the Constitution, and could never be United States citizens. Escaped slaves who reached free soil were still the legal property of their masters.

In the wake of the Dred Scott ruling, the Albany Evening Journal accused the Supreme Court, Senate, and newly inaugurated President James Buchanan of being part of a "conspiracy" to spread slavery, while the New York Tribune ran an editorial that captured the fury of many Northerners:

Now, wherever the stars and stripes wave, they protect slavery and represent slavery…. This, then, is the final fruit. In this, all the labors of our statesmen, the blood of our heroes, the life-long cares and toils of our forefathers, the aspirations of our scholars, the prayers of good men, have finally ended! America the slave breeder and slaveholder!

Southern Democrats were more emboldened than ever, some boasting that the ruling would lead to "slave auctions on Boston Common." Republicans and abolitionists had never been more electrified in their opposition. America was beginning to tear itself apart.

But few Americans knew just how much danger they were really in.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

III

On June 3rd, 1857, Abe received a letter addressed in a familiar scrawl. It contained no inquiries after his health or happiness; no regards to his family.

Abraham,

I beg you forgive my failure to write these five years. You must also forgive my abruptness, for matters here require my urgent attention.

I must ask another sacrifice of you, Abraham. I realize how presumptuous a request it must seem given all that you have suffered, and what little enticement I can offer against the contentment of home and family. Trust that I would not burden you unless the situation was dire, or if there were any other man capable of what I ask.

I have enclosed everything necessary to your swift passage to New York. If you are willing, then I beg you come no later than 1st August. Further instructions will be delivered upon your arrival. However, if your answer is no, I shall not bother you again. I ask only that you write at once with your refusal, so that we may consider a new strategy. Otherwise I look forward to our reunion, old friend—and to giving you the explanation you have long deserved.

It is time, Abraham.

Ever,

—H

Enclosed were various train and steamboat schedules, $500, and the name of a boardinghouse in New York City where a room had been rented under the name A. Rutledge.

Oh, how [the letter] annoyed me! Henry was clever indeed—for though he claimed to have little enticement to offer, every word was designed to entice: the self-censure; the flattery; the promise of an explanation—even the name left at the boardinghouse! That he would have me abandon my affairs, my family, and cross a thousand miles without so much as an intimation of the purpose!

And yet I could not refuse.

And this was more annoying than the letter itself, for Henry was right. It was time. Time for what, I knew not. Only that the

whole of my life… the suffering, the errands, the death… that it had all been leading to something more. I had felt this, even as a child—the sense that I had been placed on a long, straight stretch of river from which there could be no deviation. Carried ever faster by the current… surrounded by wilderness on both sides… destined to collide with some unseen object far, far downstream. I had never spoken of this feeling, of course, for fear of being thought vain (or worse, being proven wrong—for if every young man who was assured of his future greatness was proven correct, the world would be brimming with Napoleons). Now, however, the object was beginning to take shape, though I could not yet make out its features. If a thousand miles was the price of seeing it clearly at last, then so be it. I had traveled farther for less.

Abe arrived in New York City on July 29th. Not wanting to raise suspicion (or leave his family unattended), he'd decided to take Mary and the boys along for a "spontaneous" trip to experience the wonders of New York City.

They couldn't have picked a worse time to visit.

The city was in the midst of a violent summer. Two rival police forces had been locked in a bloody battle for legitimacy since May, leaving crime largely unchecked—a field day for muggers and murderers alike. The Lincolns reached New York just three weeks after the worst gang rioting in the city's history, rioting in which witnesses described seeing men perform "impossible feats." Abe had seen New York only once before, briefly passing through on his way north. Now he was able to appreciate the largest, most energetic of all American cities for the first time.

The drawings do it no justice—it is a city without end or equal! Each street gives way to another more grand and bustling than the last. Buildings of such size! Never have I seen so many carriages crowded together. The air rings with the clopping of horseshoes against cobblestones and the murmur of a hundred conversations. There are so many ladies carrying so many black parasols, that if a man were to look down from a rooftop, he would scarcely see the sidewalk. One imagines Rome at its height. London and its grandeur. * Mary insists we stay a month at least! For how else can we ever hope to appreciate such a place?

On the night of Sunday, August 2nd, Abe rose from bed, dressed in the dark, and tiptoed out of the room where his family slept. At precisely eleven-thirty, he crossed Washington Square and walked north, just as the note slipped under his door that morning had instructed. He was to meet Henry two miles up Fifth Avenue, in front of the orphanage at the corner of Forty-fourth

Street.

With each passing block the streets grew emptier. Darker. Here, the grand buildings and murmuring sidewalks melted into rows of two-story homes, nary a candle alight in any window. Nary a gentleman about. Passing though Madison Square Park, I marveled at the unfinished skeleton of some immense, unknown structure. ** Marveled at the absolute quiet. The barren streets. I began to imagine myself the only soul in New York, until the sound of heels against cobblestones caught my ear.

Abe glanced over his shoulder. The silhouettes of three men followed close behind.

How had they escaped my notice until now? In light of the city's recent troubles, I thought it best to double back and head south to Washington Square, back to the safety of gaslight and crowded streets. Henry could wait. Oh, what a damned fool I was! I had ventured out unarmed, knowing too well that many a gentleman had been robbed (or worse) on these streets of late—and that the police could hardly be counted on to intervene. Silently cursing myself, I turned left down Thirty-fourth Street. My heart sank as I heard their footsteps follow me around the bend—for now there could be no question of their intent. My pace quickened. Theirs quickened. "If only I could reach Broadway," I thought.

He wouldn't. His pursuers broke into a sprint. Abe did the same, making another left and running between two lots in hopes of eluding them.

My speed could still be trusted—but as fast as I was, [they] were faster. All hope of escape lost, I turned and met them with my fists.

Abe was nearly fifty years old. He hadn't wielded a weapon or been in a fight for fifteen years. Even so, he managed to land a few blows on each of his assailants before one of them landed his own, knocking him out cold.

I woke in absolute darkness, the faint rumble of a coach's wheels beneath me.

"Put him out again," said the unfamiliar voice.

A sharp, oh so brief pain on the top of my head… the universe before me in all of its color and majesty… and then… nothing.

"I am deeply sorry," said the familiar voice, "but we can trust no living man with our whereabouts."

It was Henry.

My hood was presently removed, and I found myself in the center of a grand, two-tiered ballroom, its intricate ceiling thirty

feet above my aching head; its long, dark red curtains drawn; the whole lit dimly by chandeliers. Gold upon gold. Marble upon marble. The finest carvings and furnishings, and a floor of wood so dark and polished it might have been black glass. It was the most splendid room I had ever seen or, for that matter, ever thought possible.

Three men of varying age and build stood behind Henry, each leaning against the hearth of a kingly marble fireplace. Each with contempt in his eyes. These, I assumed, were my assailants. A pair of long sofas faced each other in front of the fireplace, with a low table in between. Upon this, a silver tea service reflected the light of the fire, casting strange, intoxicating patterns on the walls and ceiling. A diminutive, graying gentleman sat on the left sofa, teacup in hand. I had seen him before… I was sure of it… but in my confused state I could not place him.

My senses returning, I noticed perhaps twenty more gentlemen scattered about the room, some standing behind me, some seated in high-backed chairs against the walls. Another twenty loomed above, looking down from the shadowy mezzanines on each side of the room. It was clear [they] meant to keep their faces hidden.

"Please," said Henry. He motioned for Abe to sit across from the diminutive gentleman.

I hesitated to come any closer until Henry (sensing the reason behind my reluctance) motioned to my assailants, and they removed from the fireplace. "I give you my word," he said as they went, "no further harm shall befall you tonight." Believing him sincere, I took a seat across from the gentleman whom I could not yet place, clutching the back of my head with my left hand and steadying myself with the other.

"Vampires," said Henry—tilting his head toward the three men who now took their seats along the wall.

"Yes," said Abe. "I'd worked that out on my own, thank you."

Henry smiled. "Vampires," he said, motioning around the ballroom. "The cursed, bloodsucking lot of us. The exceptions being yourself… and Mr. Seward here."

Seward…

Senator William Seward was the former governor of New York, one of the leading antislavery voices in Congress, and the man widely expected to be the Republican presidential nominee in 1860. He and Abe had met nine years earlier while campaigning for General Zachary "Old Rough and Ready" Taylor in New England.

"A pleasure to see you again, Mr. Lincoln," he said, extending

his hand.

Abe shook it. “Likewise, Mr. Seward, likewise.”

“You are doubtless aware of Mr. Seward’s reputation?” asked Henry.

“I am.”

“Then you must know that he is a favorite to be nominated this time around.”

“Of course.”

“Of course,” said Henry. “But tell me… did you know that Seward here has hunted and destroyed nearly as many vampires as you have?”

Abe had to bite his lip to keep his jaw from dropping. Bookish, privileged little Seward—a vampire hunter? Impossible.

“Revelations,” said Henry. “Revelations are what bring us together tonight.” Henry paced in front of the hearth.

“I have brought you here,” he said, “because my colleagues wished to see for themselves the purpose that I have seen in you. To see this Abraham Lincoln I have spoken of these many years. I have brought you here because they wanted proof that you were capable of what we ask; to judge you directly before going any further.”

And how shall I be judged? By the expediency with which I behead them?

A man’s voice rang out of the darkness: “I am sure we can find a more agreeable method than that, Mr. Lincoln.”

A few scattered laughs echoed through the room. Henry silenced them with a wave of his hand.

“It is already done,” he said. “From the moment you were carried into this room, they saw your past and your pain; peered into your soul—just as I have. Had you been deemed unworthy, you would not have been permitted to wake among us.”

“ ‘Us…’ ” said Abe. “I have long believed that vampires form no alliances.”

“Desperate times. Our enemies have allied themselves—so must we. They have recruited living men to their cause—so have we.”

Henry stopped pacing.

“There is a war coming, Abraham,” he said. “It is not a war of man, but it is man who shall spill his blood fighting it—for it concerns his very right to be free.

“A war… ,” he continued. “And you of all men must win it.”

There was nothing else now—no vampires in the mezzanines, no Seward or silver tea service… there was only Henry.

“There are those of my kind,” he said, “who choose to remain

in the shadows. Who cling to that last piece of themselves that is human. We are content to feed and be forgotten. To go about our cursed existence in relative peace, killing only when our hunger becomes unbearable. But there are others of my kind… those who see themselves as lions among sheep. As kings—superior to man in every way. Why, then, should they be confined to darkness? Why should they fear man?

"It is a conflict that began long before there was an America. A conflict between two groups of vampires: those who seek to coexist with man, and those who would see all of mankind in chains—bred, raised, and corralled as cattle."

Judge us not equally, Abraham…

"These fifty years," said Henry, "we have done everything in our power to prevent this war. Each of the errands I have sent you on—each has been with the aim of destroying those who would see it hastened, and your efforts—those of Seward and others—have indeed slowed its progress. But we can no longer hope to prevent it. Indeed, not four weeks ago we saw the first battle fought here on the streets of New York."

Strange sightings… impossible feats…

"Our enemies are shrewd," said Henry. "They have made their cause the cause of the South. Allied themselves with living men who defend slavery as fervently as they. But these men have been deceived into quickening their own doom, for Negroes are only the first of the living to be enslaved. If we lose, Abraham, then it is only a matter of time before every living man, woman, and child in America is a slave."

Abe felt as if he might be sick.

"That, old friend, is why we must not lose. That is why we have allied ourselves. We are vampires who believe in the rights of man," said Henry. "We are the Union… and we have plans for you, old friend."

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

PART III

PRESIDENT

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

TEN

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

A House Divided

"A house divided against itself cannot stand." I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other.

—Abraham Lincoln, accepting the Republican
Party's nomination for senator
June 16th, 1858

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

I

In the predawn hours of February 23rd, 1861, a tall, cloaked figure was rushed onto the platform of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Depot before his train had even come to a stop, ten hours before anyone expected him to arrive. His feet seldom touched the ground as a mass of armed men hurried him into a waiting coach, which sped off as soon as its reinforced door had clicked shut. Inside, two bodyguards joined him behind the black curtains, their revolvers at the ready as if they expected the night to be shattered by gunfire at any moment. Outside, a third man sat next to the driver, his black eyes peering into the dark streets of Washington, D.C., looking for any sign of danger ahead. There were more of his kind waiting at the hotel, making sure no one entered without their knowledge and blessing; making sure their precious cargo was delivered safely to his bed. There was even a man stationed on the roof of the building across the way, looking for anyone who might try to crawl down the facade and enter through a window.

Henry Sturges had insisted on this unprecedented level of security—and his insistence had proven wise….

For President Elect Abraham Lincoln had just survived his first assassination attempt.

In late 1857, not long after his return from that fateful meeting in New York, Abe announced that he would run against Stephen Douglas for the Senate. Unbeknownst to his supporters, this announcement had been preceded by the arrival of a letter:

Abraham,

As you guessed in your letter of September 13th, we must ask you to oppose Mr. Douglas. The Senator, as you no doubt suspect, is one of the many living men who have fallen prey to our enemy's influence. Do not concern yourself with the outcome of this election—rather, use your particular passion and oratory skill to combat slavery at every turn. We will see to it that the results are favorable to our cause. Trust in yourself, Abraham. Never forget that this is your purpose.

Ever,

—H

P.S. Matthew 12:25 *

Abe accepted the Republican Party's nomination for Senate on June 16th, 1858, with what would be known as his "House Divided" speech. In it, he accused Senator Douglas of being part of the "machinery" designed to spread slavery to all of America. Without any mention of vampires, Abe alluded to the "strange, discordant, and even hostile elements" that had come together to fight a "proud and pampered enemy" to the south.

Between August 21st and October 15th, he and Douglas held a series of seven debates throughout Illinois, some attended by as many as 10,000 onlookers. They became an instant sensation, thrusting both men onto the national stage as transcripts of their battle appeared in newspapers throughout the country. For his part, Douglas tried to paint Abe as a radical abolitionist. He excelled at whipping the crowd into a frenzy with images of freed slaves flocking to Illinois; of black settlements springing up in white backyards; of black men marrying white women.

If you desire [blacks] to vote on an equality with yourselves, and to make them eligible to office, to serve on juries, and to adjudge your rights, then support Mr. Lincoln and the Black Republican party, who are in favor of the citizenship of the Negro!

Abe struck back at Douglas's doom and gloom with a simple moral truth—one that he owed (whether he would admit it or not) to his father's Baptist upbringing.

I agree with Judge Douglas—[the black man] is not my equal in many respects—certainly not in color, perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment. But in the right to eat the bread, without the leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns, he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man.

FIG. 29 - A MAN AND WOMAN (LIKELY VAMPIRES) POSE OUTSIDE A SLAVE AUCTION COMPANY IN ATLANTA, GEORGIA SHORTLY BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR.

Still, Abe was frustrated by his inability to get at the real issue—the fact that Douglas was the servant of creatures who would see all of mankind in chains. * Following a debate in Charleston, Illinois, Abe vented this frustration in his journal.

More signs in the crowd today. "Negro Equality Is Immoral!" "America for Whites!" I look out at these crowds… at these fools. These fools who haven't the slightest idea how to live the morals they espouse. These fools who proclaim themselves men of God, yet show not the slightest reverence to His word. Christians preaching slavery! Slaveholders preaching morality! Is it any different from a drunkard preaching temperance? A whore

preaching modesty? I look at these fools campaigning for their own doom, and I am tempted to tell them the whole truth of what they face. Imagine their reaction! Imagine their panic! Oh, if I could but say the word once! “Vampire!” Oh, if only I could point at that portly runt * and shame him before all of creation! Expose him for the traitor that he is! The traitor to his own kind! If only I could see men like Douglas and Buchanan in chains—victims of the very institution they champion!

His frustration (or his desire to throw Douglas off guard), led Abe to insert several thinly veiled references to the vampire threat during the final debate on October 15th.

That is the issue that will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Judge Douglas and myself shall be silent. It is the eternal struggle between these two principles—right and wrong—throughout the world. They are the two principles that have stood face-to-face from the beginning of time; and will ever continue to struggle. The one is the common right of humanity and the other the divine right of kings.

Abe had electrified antislavery forces across Illinois and the North. Unfortunately senators were still elected by their state legislatures in 1858. The Democratic majority (or more accurately, its vampire backers) in Springfield sent Stephen Douglas back to Washington for another six years. “Another six years,” as Abe wrote in his journal, “of doing the bidding of Southern vampires.” For the first time in years, he found himself struggling with a bout of depression.

I have failed the oppressed… the helpless faces crying out for justice. I have failed to meet the expectations of freedom-loving people everywhere. Is this the “purpose” which Henry so often speaks of? To fail?

His melancholy wouldn’t last long. Three days after his defeat, Abe received a letter from Henry consisting of three short sentences.

We are pleased to hear of your loss. Our plans continue unabated. Await further instructions.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

II

The theater had become one of Abe's favorite escapes over the years. Perhaps it was his love of storytelling that drew him in; the theatrical flourishes he added to his carefully scripted performances that allowed him to relate. Perhaps the nervous thrill he felt when speaking before thousands gave him an appreciation for the performers. Abe enjoyed musicals and operas, but he was particularly fond of plays (whether they were comedies or tragedies didn't seem to matter). More than anything, he enjoyed seeing his beloved Shakespeare brought to life.

And so it was with particular delight that Mary and I took in a performance of Julius Caesar on a blustery February evening—the recent troubles of the election behind us at last. Our dear friend Mayor [William] Jayne had been kind enough to lend us his box and its four seats.

The Lincolns were joined that evening by Abe's law partner Ward Hill Lamon and his thirty-four-year-old wife, Angelina. The production was, in Abe's words, "a splendid spectacle of ancient dress and painted scenery"—with the exception of a misspoken line in the first act.

I nearly broke out laughing when the wretched soothsayer warned Caesar: "Beware the Ides of April." * I thought it a miracle (and a relief) that no one in the audience had snickered or yelled out a correction. How could such an error be made by an actor? Had my ears deceived me?

In Act III, Scene 2, Marc Antony stood over Caesar's slain, betrayed body and began the play's most iconic speech:

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;

I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him;

The evil that men do lives after them,

The good is oft interred with their bones…

Abe's eyes welled up at the young actor's impassioned delivery.

I had read those words countless times; marveled at the genius of their construction. Only now, though, in the hands of this gifted young man did they ring true. Only now did I comprehend the whole of their meaning. "You all did love him once, not without cause," he said. "What cause withholds you

then, to mourn for him now?" Upon this, however, his speech came to a stop. He leapt from the stage and into the audience.

What strange interpretation was this? We watched him, bemused yet fascinated, as he bounded toward our side of the theater and disappeared through the door which led to our box. Apprehension suddenly filled the whole of my body, for I was sure that he meant to make a spectacle of my being in attendance. I had reason to worry, for this had happened several times in the past. Such exhibitions were one of the perils of being a public figure, and [they] always produced in me no small measure of embarrassment.

Just as Abe feared, the young actor entered the box with a flourish, drawing light laughter and applause from the audience. Every eye in the theater was trained on him as he stood behind the Lincolns and their guests. Abe smiled nervously, sure of what was coming next. But (to his surprise and relief) the actor simply continued his speech:

"Oh judgment!" he cried. "Thou art fled to brutish beasts and men have lost their reason!" Upon this, he produced a revolver from his costume, leveled it at the back of [Angelina's] head, and fired. The noise quite frightened me, and I laughed, momentarily certain that this was all part of the play. But when I saw her dress covered with pieces of brain; when I saw her slump forward in her chair—the blood running not only from her wounds, but from her ears and nostrils as water from a well—I knew.

Mary's screams set off a panic below, the audience trampling each other to reach the rear of the hall. I drew the knife from my coat (I had taken to carrying one since my meeting with the Union) and rose to meet the bastard as Lamon attended to his wife, lifting her head and calling to her in vain as her blood poured over his hands. I reached the actor just as he leveled his pistol at Mary. I brought my blade down on him, sinking the whole of it into the muscle where his neck and shoulder met, causing him to drop the gun before he fired. I pulled my blade out and made to bury it again. Before I could, the world turned on its side.

The young actor kicked Abe's legs out from under him, sending him to the floor and sending the knife flying from his hands. Abe looked down the length of his body—toward the strange, pulsing pain coming from his left leg. It had been twisted at the knee so that it bent neither forward nor backward, but grotesquely to the side.

At once I felt terribly sick. Seeing me in this state, Lamon left his wife and joined the fight. He turned to meet the devil with his

own revolver, but before he could level it, the actor drove a fist into his mouth with such force as to push his teeth inward and loose his jaw from its hinge.

A goddamned vampire…

Mary could bear the scene no longer and fainted dead away, falling to the ground near her chair. Lamon stumbled backward and steadied himself against the railing—clutching at his jaw, instinctively trying to force it back into place. The vampire retrieved his weapon, leveled it at Lamon's head, and fired, sending pieces of skull flying over the railing and onto the empty seats below. He was gone. The vampire next turned the gun on Mary, and despite my screams of protest, shot her through the chest as she slept. She would never wake.

He came for me next, standing over me as I lay helpless. He aimed the barrel of his revolver at my head. Our eyes met.

They were Henry's eyes.

"Sic semper tyrann—"

The last word was cut off by the sound of the shot.

Abe awoke with a start.

He sat straight up in his bed and shielded his face with his hands, just as he had all those years ago, on the night he saw his father dealing with the devil. The night Jack Barts had condemned his mother to death.

Mary slept peacefully by his side. His boys were safely in their beds. A thorough check of the house turned up no evidence of trespassers—living or otherwise. Still, Abe would sleep no more that February night. There'd been something so familiar about the dream. So real. He could see every detail of the theater in his mind; every detail of the costumes and scenery. He could feel the nauseating pain of his leg, and hear Angelina's blood running onto the floor. But try as he might, Abe couldn't remember those three damned words that his murderer uttered just before he woke. *

Shortly after Abe's dream, William Seward, still the heavy favorite to be the Republican presidential nominee in 1860, made a strange tactical decision:

Seward has abruptly left for a tour of Europe, and shall be gone these next six months at least. What can it mean on the eve of so crucial an election? How can such an absence be to his advantage? There are many who have criticized [the trip] as proof of his arrogance; his aloofness. I, however, am reluctant to levy such condemnation—for I suspect that he has been sent at the Union's behest.

Abe's suspicion was confirmed by Henry's next letter.

Abraham,

Our friend S has been sent on an errand—one which we hope will shore up support for our cause in the coming months and years. We now ask that you turn your whole heart toward that greatest of political contests.

—H

In Seward's absence, Abe's political allies worked to shore up support for a presidential run, while Abe worked on raising his national awareness. On the evening of February 27th, 1860, at New York's Cooper Institute, he delivered what some historians consider to be the greatest political speech of all time to an audience of more than a thousand.

"Neither let us be slandered from our duty by false accusations against us," Abe shouted, "nor frightened from it by menaces of destruction to the Government nor of dungeons to ourselves. Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it."

The full text ran in every major New York newspaper the next day, and within a couple of weeks, pamphlets containing "Lincoln's Cooper Speech" were available throughout the North. Abe was emerging as the intellectual leader of the Republican Party, and its most gifted speaker.

The Democratic Party, meanwhile, had been split in two.

Northern Democrats nominated Abe's old rival Stephen Douglas for president, while Southerners picked the incumbent vice president, John C. Breckenridge. The fracture was no accident. Rather, it was the result of a decades-long effort by the Union. Since the early nineteenth century, Henry and his allies had worked to undermine their enemies at every turn: ferrying slaves to the North on the Underground Railroad, dispatching spies across the South, and more recently, discouraging secessionist talk in state legislatures. But their greatest achievement came on May 18th, 1860, on the third ballot of the Republican National Convention in Chicago.

Abe was in Springfield when he learned that he, not Seward, had been nominated for president.

I can scarcely comprehend that such an honor has been bestowed upon me, and yet (and there is no hope of putting this modestly, so I shall not attempt to) it comes as no surprise. There is a war coming. It shall not be a war of man—but it is man who shall spill his blood fighting it—for it concerns his very right to be free. And I, of all men, must win it.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

III

In 1860, presidential candidates weren't expected to campaign on their own behalf. The speechmaking and handshaking were traditionally left to political allies and subordinates, while the candidates themselves remained behind the scenes, quietly writing letters and greeting well-wishers. Abe saw no reason to break with tradition. While his supporters (including Seward who, despite losing the nomination, threw his full weight behind Abe) tirelessly traveled the country on his behalf, candidate Lincoln remained with his family in Springfield. From an entry dated April 16th:

I walk to and from my office each morning, greeting friends as I pass; thanking strangers for their good wishes. When my business is concluded, I gambol about with my two youngest at home before seeing them off to bed, and when the weather is suitable, I join Mary for a [walk]. Life is much as it ever was, with three exceptions—those being the three vampires who have come to keep watch over us.

FIG. 13.2. - ABE POSES IN FRONT OF HIS FAMILY'S ABANDONED CABIN AT LITTLE PIGEON CREEK IN 1860 -- LEANING ON HIS TRUSTY OLD AXE. THE IMAGE WAS MEANT TO BOLSTER HIS REPUTATION AS A CANDIDATE WITH HUMBLE ROOTS, AND WAS CONCEIVED BY HENDRY STURGES HIMSELF.

Abe's swift-footed assailants had been reassigned by Henry and the Union. They were now his personal bodyguards, sworn to protect him at all costs.

I suspect they are somewhat embittered for being thus assigned (though it is impossible to know, for they rarely speak). I have several times referred to them as my "unholy trinity" in jest, but this has yet to produce in them a single smile. They are a deadly serious lot. Which, I suppose, makes them well suited to the task of keeping me alive.

Mary and the children were told that the men were "campaign volunteers" who'd come to ward off "overeager supporters." It was a plausible explanation. Abe had become quite famous, and the Lincolns' home was beset by well-wishers and favor seekers at all hours. But vampire bodyguards were only one

of the secrets “Honest Old Abe” kept from his wife and adoring public that summer.

He’d also scraped the rust off his ax.

And for the first time, his target was a living man.

Abraham,

I must ask one more errand of you. He is one of your kind—but is looked after by two of mine at all times. Take every caution.

Abe nearly gasped when he saw the name below…

Jefferson Davis.

There was hardly a more accomplished Southern politician in America. Davis had graduated from West Point, fought valiantly in the Mexican-American War, served as governor of Mississippi, served in Franklin Pierce’s cabinet, and been twice elected to the Senate. He was an outspoken proslavery advocate, and, as a former Secretary of War, the man best suited to lead the South against the better-armed, more populous North.

This time, Abe refused to go.

Henry,

I am an old man with three sons and a wife who has wept over too many graves already. I will cause her no further grief by getting myself killed. Surely there are a hundred, or a thousand among your kind better suited to the task. Why must you prevail upon me when I am years removed from my best?

Send someone else.

Yours,

—Abraham

Henry’s reply came by express a mere four days after Abe sent his refusal off to New York.

Abraham,

It is a difficult thing to know the future. We see it reflected as in ripples of water—distorted and ever moving. There are moments, however, when the ripples subside and the reflection becomes clear. The Union saw one of those moments in your future that night in New York: you are destined to defeat Jefferson Davis, Abraham. You alone. Further, I do not believe that it is your destiny to die on this errand. I feel this with my whole self. I would not send you otherwise. It must be you, Abraham. I beg you reconsider.

Ever,

—H

Abe was fifty-two years old. And while he remained remarkably agile for his age, he was a far cry from the young hunter who could split a log from fifty yards. He needed backup.

I have sent word to Speed to meet me in Springfield at once, and—after a great deal of consideration—I have brought Lamon to the truth, as well. He thought me either "round the bend or a damned, lying fool" when first I revealed the story of vampires and their evil designs on man, and very nearly lost his temper—until I prevailed upon one of the trinity to confirm my story—which he did in dramatic fashion. There are few men who can be trusted in this war, and though [Lamon] and I disagree on a great many things (slavery being not the least of them), he has proven himself a loyal friend. With Jack gone, enlisting a man of his size seems prudent—particularly when Speed is so slight, and I am getting on in years.

My God… I feel rather like [King] Henry at Harfleur. *

In July, the three hunters traveled by train to Bolivar County, Mississippi, where, Abe had been told, Jefferson Davis was recovering after undergoing eye surgery. Concealed in their luggage was a traveling armory of revolvers, knives, crossbows, and Abe's ax—newly sharpened, glistening once again. Candidate Lincoln had spent days secretly whittling new stakes for his quiver and fashioning a new chest plate to wear beneath his coat. He'd retreated to the woods with his ax and practiced throwing it into tree trunks ten, then twenty yards distant. He'd even dusted off his old martyr recipe and prepared a new batch.

I insisted that the trinity remain in Springfield to look after my family. It was a simple errand, I told them. Our target was merely a living man, after all—one rendered infirm and half-blind by surgery. Speed, Lamon, and I were more than capable of dispensing with Davis and his vampire minders.

The hunters tied up their horses on the edge of Davis's property just after one o'clock in the morning on Monday, July 30th. They kept their distance from the main house, lying in the surrounding woods for a watchful half hour, whispering occasionally, waiting in the faint light of a cloud-covered moon.

Abe had received a second letter from Henry before they'd departed Springfield, a letter bearing new intelligence. The Union's spies had learned that Davis was confined to a bedroom on the west side of the second floor. Intent on giving him peace while he healed, his wife, Varina, had taken to sleeping in an adjacent room with their two infant sons and five-year-old daughter. At night, Davis's two minders took turns patrolling the grounds while the other remained in the house.

I thought it strange, therefore, that we saw no sign of such patrols, or lights burning in any of the windows. Henry's instructions, however, were precise, and we had traveled a long

way. There could be no thoughts of turning back. Satisfied that we had waited long enough, we readied our weapons and crept into the clearing around the two-story house. It was white (or yellow, I could not tell in the dark), with a raised front porch and first story, as these parts were often deluged when the Mississippi swelled beyond its banks. I half expected to see a vampire waiting at the front door, long since alerted to our presence by the distant whinnying of our horses, the scent of the martyrs in my coat. But there was nothing. Only stillness. Doubts flooded my mind as we climbed the steps to the porch. Did I still possess the strength to best a vampire? Had I prepared Lamon to face an opponent of such speed and strength? Was Speed still equal to the task at hand? Indeed, the ax in my hands felt heavier than it had since I was a child.

Abe slowly nudged the front door as Lamon took aim, ready to shoot the vampire that was almost certainly going to leap out of the shadows the moment it was opened.

None did.

We entered—I with my ax held high; Speed looking down the barrel of his .44 caliber [rifle]; Lamon with a revolver in each hand. We searched the dark, sparsely furnished first floor, our every step announced by creaking floorboards as we went. If indeed there was a vampire guarding Davis above, he knew we were here now. Finding no sign of the dead (or living) below, we returned to the front of the house and its narrow staircase.

Abe led the way up. There were vampires here—he could feel it.

I could see the next several moments unfold in my mind as I climbed the stairs. Upon reaching the top, one of the vampires would spring from hiding and strike from my right side. I would turn my ax in his direction and lodge it in his chest as we met, but in doing so, I would be knocked backward—and the two of us would be sent tumbling down the stairs. As we wrestled, the second vampire would strike Speed and Lamon above. Lamon would panic (this being his first hunt) and empty his revolvers wildly, but his bullets would miss the mark. It would therefore fall to Speed and his rifle to silence the creature, which he would do by shooting it cleanly through the heart and head. The noise would rouse Mrs. Davis and the children from sleep, and they would scurry into the hall at precisely the moment I freed my ax from the first vampire's chest and took his head at the base of the staircase. Their screams would bring the frail, half-blind Jefferson Davis stumbling out of his own bedroom, upon which Speed and Lamon would shoot him to death. With our sincere apologies to

his family, we would then run off into the night.

But on reaching the top of the stairs, Abe found nothing. Every door was open. Every room empty.

Could we be in the wrong place? Could Davis have suddenly and inexplicably risen from his bed and departed for Washington? No—no, Henry's instructions had been meticulous. This was the house. This was the intended date and time of our strike. It was all wrong.

There are vampires here… I can feel it.

The truth now formed in my mind. Oh, that I had ignored my instincts! That I had come at all! Damn Henry's rippling water! How could I have been so reckless? How could I have ventured my life with three sons at home? A wife who was already fragile from grief? No… I would not die tonight. I refused.

"Out," whispered Abe. "Out at once—and make ready your weapons… we are betrayed."

We bounded down the stairs toward the front door, but on reaching it found it locked from the outside. The clapping of wood against wood now surrounded us as storm shutters were slammed shut over every window, and a chorus of hammers pounded nails into the house, ensuring they could not be opened. "Upstairs!" I cried. But here, too, the shutters had been closed and fastened.

"They've trapped us!" said Lamon.

"Yes," said Speed. "However, all things being equal, I'd rather be in here with us than out there with them."

Abe said nothing. He knew it wouldn't be long before they smelled the smoke; before they felt the heat of the fire as it ate through the walls and floorboards. As if answering this thought, Lamon exclaimed, "Look!" and pointed to the flickering orange light coming through the crack beneath the front door.

They had no choice.

Whatever horrors waited outside, they couldn't be worse than certain death by burning. The flames were now visible all around them through the slats in the storm shutters.

I had a plan. Once through the door, we would remain shoulder to shoulder, three across, and charge straight ahead until we reached the tree line. I would take the center, using my ax to cut down whatever came at us from the front. Speed and Lamon would be on my right and left, shooting whatever came at us from the sides. It was a plan almost certain to fail (based on how quickly the shutters had closed around us, there were at least a dozen men, vampires, or some combination of the two outside), but it was the only one we had. I lifted my ax and steadied

myself. “Gentlemen,” I said.

The front door flew open with a single blow of Abe’s ax, sending smoke and hot ash flying away from the porch.

The heat was immediate. It drove us back at first, blistering our skin and very nearly setting our clothes alight. When my eyes adjusted to the flames on the front porch (by now fully engulfed), I saw that the fallen door had provided a narrow path across. I held my breath and led the way, hurrying over the door, down the front steps and onto the grass below. No sooner had my feet touched the ground than I realized the hopelessness of our effort. For in the light of the burning house behind us, I discerned no fewer than twenty figures ahead—some aiming rifles, others wearing dark glasses to shield their eyes from the flames. Living men and vampires—conspiring to cut off all hope of escape. One of the living, an older gentleman, stepped forward and stood but ten feet from me.

“Mr. Lincoln, I presume,” he said.

“Mr. Davis,” said Abe.

“I’d be much obliged,” said Davis, “if your companions would put those irons down. I’d hate for one of my men to startle and fill the three of you with holes.”

Abe turned to Speed and Lamon and gave a nod. Both dropped their guns.

“The big one is concealing another pistol,” said one of the vampires behind Davis. “He’s thinking about reaching for it right now.”

“Well, if he does,” said Davis, “then I suggest you kill him.” Davis turned back to Abe. “Your ax as well, if you please.”

“If it’s all the same, Mr. Davis,” said Abe, “I don’t expect to live but a few moments longer, and I would very much like to die holding the ax my daddy gave me as a boy. Surely one of your men will shoot me if I raise it in anger.”

Davis smiled. “I like you, Mr. Lincoln—I do. Kentucky born, same as me. Self-made. As fine an orator as ever lived—and dedicated, my Lord! Coming all the way down here just to kill a man! Leaving your family alone and unprotected in Springfield… no, sir, let no man speak ill of your convictions. I could sing your praises till morning, sir—but some of my associates are rather sensitive to sunlight, and… well, I’m afraid we just don’t have that long.

“Tell me,” said Davis, “with your many fine qualities and famous mind, how is it that you’ve arrived on the wrong side of this fight?”

“I?” asked Abe. “I must have misheard you, sir—for of the

two of us, only one is conspiring against his fellow man."

"Mr. Lincoln, vampires are superior to man, just as man is superior to the Negro. It's the natural order of things, you see. Surely we agree on this much, at least?"

"I agree that some vampires are superior to some men."

"Am I wrong, therefore, to recognize the inevitability of their rule? Am I wrong to side with the greater power in the coming war? Sir, it brings me no pleasure to think of white men in cages. But if it must come to pass—if vampires are to be the kings of men—then let us work with them while time remains. Let us regulate the thing—limit it to the Negro, and to the undesirables of our own race."

"Ah," said Abe. "And when the blood of Negroes is no longer sufficient; when the 'undesirables' of our race have been exhausted—tell me, Mr. Davis… who then shall your 'kings' feed upon?"

Davis said nothing.

"America," Abe continued, "was forged in the blood of those who opposed tyranny. You and your allies… would you not see it delivered into the hands of tyrants?"

"America is thataway, Mr. Lincoln," laughed Davis, pointing north. "You're in Mississippi now." He stepped forward, to the very edge of where Abe's ax could reach if he chose to swing it. "And let us speak plainly, sir. We're both the servants of vampires. But when these hostilities are at an end, I will be left to enjoy the peace of my remaining years in comfort and wealth, and you will be dead. And there it is."

Davis paused a moment, offered a slight bow, and retreated. Three of the living men now stepped to the front of the group—each with a rifle aimed at us. Each waiting for Davis to give the order.

"Damn it, Abe," said Lamon. "Are we just gonna stand here and do nothing?"

"I'm wearing a watch," Speed told the executioners, his voice cracking. "It belonged to my grandfather, I—I ask only that someone see it back to my wife in Louisville."

These are the last seconds of my life.

"Well, if I'm dying," said Lamon, "I'm dying with a gun in my hand." He reached for his coat.

"Boys," said Abe to his friends, "I'm sorry for dragging you into th—"

The crack of rifles filled the night before he could finish.

In that instant I saw the faces of all those loved ones departed from this earth: my dear, sweet little boy; my sturdy

Armstrong and beloved Ann. I saw my sister, and my angel mother. But when this instant passed, and my eyes remembered themselves, my executioners remained in the light of the burning house, shock on their faces. Speed and Lamon remained standing on either side of me.

We still lived. Our executioners, however, were not as fortunate. All three fell in unison, bullets having torn though their skulls.

It was a miracle.

That miracle was Henry Sturges.

He charged out of the dark with eleven Union vampires on his heels. Some held rifles, others revolvers, firing as they came. The Southern vampires nearest Davis hurried him off, while the others prepared to meet their Northern counterparts. One of them, however, remembered that the job of my execution remained unfinished. He leapt at me from twenty yards distant, fangs and claws extended, eyes black behind his dark glasses. I let my ax fly, and the blade found its target—but my strength not being what it once was, it failed to sink more than an inch or two into his middle. He fell back briefly and looked at the dark ribbons pouring from the gash in his belly. They were of no concern. He picked my ax off the ground and came at me again. I thrust a hand into my coat, looking for a knife that had not been there in twenty years… helpless. With the vampire not four feet from me, Lamon aimed over my shoulder and fired, forever diminishing the hearing in my left ear, but silencing the creature with a bullet through the face.

As the smoke from Lamon's revolver hung in the air around his head, Abe became aware of a sharp pain coming from his chin.

I pressed my hand to it. [The vampire] had come close enough to open a gash with the tip of my ax. Blood dripped from the wound and down the front of my shirt as vampires clashed before us in the light of the flames—jumping impossible distances, crashing into each other with enough force to shake the ground beneath our feet.

Here, for the first time, I saw Henry Sturges in battle. I watched him run headlong into a Southern vampire and drive the devil into a tree—the result being that its trunk split in two. Yet Henry's opponent was hardly affected, for he pushed back and began to swing wildly with his hands, as if holding a sword in each. Henry defended each of these strikes with his own clawed hands, until, being the better swordsman of the two, he saw an opportunity and ran his opponent through the middle—forcing

five straightened fingers into the vampire's belly and out his back, snapping his spine in the process. Henry withdrew his hand, and his opponent fell to the ground, unable to move. I watched him twist the vampire's head backward and rip it from his shoulders.

The living men unfortunate enough to find themselves in the middle of this melee were torn apart, their limbs taken by errant claws, their bones crushed by the force of the vampires colliding around them. Realizing that the numbers were not in their favor, the remaining Southern vampires made a hasty retreat. Several Union vampires gave chase—the others, including Henry, hurried to meet us where we stood.

"Abraham," he said. "I'm pleased to see you alive, old friend."

"And I to see you dead."

Henry smiled. He tore a sleeve from his shirt and held it to Abe's chin to slow the bleeding, while his companions attended to Lamon and Speed (who were shaken up but otherwise unharmed).

The Union had been given false information by a traitorous spy—information meant to lure me to my death. Henry and his allies did not learn of this treachery until after we left Springfield. With no means of getting word to us (for we traveled under false names), they rode for two days and nights to head us off, while sending word to the trinity to have Mary and the boys placed in hiding.

"And you're sure they're safe?" asked Abe.

"I'm sure they're in hiding, and protected by three of my most cunning, most vicious allies," said Henry.

It would suffice. Abe knew that the trinity took their work seriously.

"Henry," he said after a long pause, "I was certain that I was going to—"

"I told you, Abraham… it wasn't your time."

It would be the last hunt of Abe's life.

On November 6th, 1860, Abe sat in a cramped telegraph office in Springfield.

The tide of well-wishers and appointment seekers had risen to unbearable levels as the election approached. When the 6th came at last, I declared that I wished to see no one until all the votes were in. My only company was to be the young [telegraph] operator. If the outcome was the one I and my supporters expected, there would be few peaceful days in the coming years.

He'd grown a beard for the first time in his life to conceal the scar on his chin. * It gave his face a fuller, healthier appearance.

“More distinguished,” as Mary said. “A face befitting the next president.”

Mary was, at first, quite opposed to my running—having not enjoyed her previous time in Washington, and being all too aware of the time such an endeavor would require of me. As my campaign met with increasing success, however, her position began to change. I suspect that she rather enjoyed the well-wishers who came to our door at all hours; the wealthy couples who invited us to their homes for dinner; and the lavish events thrown in my honor. I suspect that she began to see the many social possibilities of being married to the president of the United States.

As the returns began to trickle in over the telegraph wires that Tuesday evening, it seemed more and more certain that Abe would be just that.

I admit it came as little surprise, for I believed that the Union would see to my victory—whether earned or not. **

I could therefore feel none of the honor that had accompanied my being elected captain by my fellow soldiers. The weight of the thing was immense. The challenges and miseries ahead unknowable and numerous.

Henry’s telegram had been one of the first to arrive that morning—long before a single vote had been counted.

CONGRATULATIONS MR PRESIDENT EVER H

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

IV

President Elect Abraham Lincoln's journey to the White House began in Springfield on February 11th, 1861. A private train was ordered to shepherd Abe, his family, his close associates, and his private security detail to Washington, D.C.

It hadn't been an easy transition.

Just over a month after the election, South Carolina's legislature voted to secede from the Union. One by one, more Southern states followed—seven in all by Inauguration Day: Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and Texas. Abe could only watch as President Buchanan did nothing to stem the crisis.

[Buchanan] continues to rest on his rump as the country comes apart. As the ships of our navy and forts are daily surrendered to the South, and the Union dissolves before our eyes. His weakness astonishes. It seems clear that he has decided to kick this crisis down the road. I, on the other hand, am very much looking forward to kicking him onto Pennsylvania Avenue.

Three days before Abe's train left Springfield, the self-proclaimed "Leaders of the Southern People" met in Montgomery, Alabama, to formally adopt a constitution and announce the Confederate States of America.

They chose Jefferson Davis as their president.

Abe's trinity patrolled the train day and night. Officially, they were "detectives" from Springfield who'd volunteered to look after the new president. His security detail also included a pair of humans—a detective named Allan Pinkerton and his old friend Ward Hill Lamon. Lamon had volunteered to be Abe's bodyguard out of nothing more than friendly concern for his safety. He was one of the few around the new president who knew the gravity of the threats he faced. In the coming years, White House staff would grow used to seeing Lamon patrol the White House grounds after dark, or sleeping in front of the door to the president's bedroom. He was big, tough, handy with a gun, and fiercely loyal—and his help was desperately needed.

Abe's train was scheduled to stop in at least ten major cities on the way to Washington. In each one, thousands (if not tens of thousands) of locals came in hopes of seeing the new president

with their own eyes. Abe would often make an impromptu speech from the rear car—sometimes only inches from those who'd packed in to hear him speak. He would then leave the stations by coach to meet with local leaders, attend banquets, or watch parades in his honor. It was a security nightmare.

It has been an overwhelming several days. The boys are in fine spirits, though—running about the train, watching the country roll by through its windows. Bob finds it "all so very exciting," while Willie and Tad seem not the least bit affected by the crowds, or by the presence of so many new faces. Mary, too, seems to be taking it all in stride, though her head has been especially bothersome this trip. *

For all the excitement, there was a conspicuous tension hanging over the train. Everyone on board felt it, though no one spoke of it openly.

There are some who have sworn that I shall never live to see the White House. Such talk breeds grave concern (an appropriate kind given the subject) on the faces of my protectors. I, however, can honestly say that it costs me not one nickel of sleep—for I have known death my entire life, and have come to regard him as something of an old friend. Of course, Mary is roused to great anxiety by these rumors (but then, she is roused to great anxiety by a great many things). So long as our boys hear nothing of it, I am content.

The trip continued without incident for ten days, through Indiana, Ohio, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania—and it began to seem that all the talk of assassination was just that. But on February 22nd in Philadelphia, Abe received an urgent visit from William Seward's son, Frederick. He came bearing a sealed letter.

Dear Mr. President Elect,

Our mutual acquaintance wishes it known that a plot has been discovered in Baltimore. Four men will stab and shoot you to death when you change trains at the Calvert Street Station. He thought it best you should be aware of this, so that you may take every precaution against it.

Yours,

—Wm. Seward

It was decided that Abe, accompanied by Pinkerton and Lamon, and wearing a hat and cloak to conceal his identity from the other passengers, would take a separate train through Baltimore directly to Washington. Pinkerton and Lamon would be armed, Abe wouldn't.

This caused quite a squabble, I recall. Lamon (who knew me

to be proficient with such weapons) insisted I be given a revolver and a long knife. Pinkerton refused. “I will not have it said that the future president of the United States entered the capital armed!” The two nearly came to blows over the matter, until I offered a compromise: Lamon would carry two of each weapon, and would give them over only if we came under attack. It was agreed to, and we prepared to be off.

But their plans changed when Pinkerton realized that the trinity was gone.

[They] had simply vanished somewhere between Philadelphia and Harrisburg—giving no reason for their absence. As I refused to leave Mary and the boys without an armed escort, it was quickly decided that Pinkerton would stay behind and look after them while Lamon accompanied me on the other train. The telegraph lines between Pennsylvania and Maryland were then cut, so that any conspirators would be unable to relay word of our departure from Harrisburg.

Just after midnight on the 23rd, Abe’s “secret” train passed through Baltimore on its way to Washington.

There were anxious moments as we passed through the heart of the city (more slowly, it seemed, than any train I had ever ridden on). Could these assassins have discovered our trick? Were they, at this very moment, preparing to bombard our train with cannon fire?

Abe needn’t have worried. By the time his train rolled through the station, three of his would-be assassins were already dead—and the fourth was dying beneath his feet.

The partial bodies of four men were found near Calvert Street Station the next morning. From the February 23rd edition of the Baltimore Sun:

Two gentlemen have had [their] heads taken. Another has been viciously beaten, to the extent that police are as yet unable to determine his age or race. The fourth, it seems, was halved beneath the wheels of a passing locomotive. Incredibly, a witness claims that the gentleman survived for several minutes thereafter—his spine being severed in such a way that he was still able to move his head and arms. He was seen faintly crying out and attempting to drag his remaining body from the tracks before dying.

Though they never spoke a word about the incident, Abe never doubted that his three vampire protectors had been responsible for the carnage.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

V

On March 4th, 1861, Abraham Lincoln—exceptional boy of Sinking Springs Farm, apple of his departed mother's eye, survivor of the trials of Job, and one of the nation's most accomplished vampire hunters—was sworn in as the sixteenth president of the United States.

We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

Tens of thousands gathered in front of a covered wooden platform on the Capitol steps to hear him speak. Little did they know that they were witnessing the largest security operation in history. Troops were stationed around the city, ready to put down any violent protests or large-scale attacks. Police (both uniformed and not) stood guard beneath the podium where Abe spoke, keeping an eye out for anyone who might raise a revolver or long rifle. Closer to the president elect, Ward Hill Lamon hovered on the platform with two revolvers in his coat and a long knife on his belt. The vampires of the trinity were stationed at different points, but they were never far from Abe.

Only later would I learn that the hearts of two armed men had been discreetly run through during my speech. Unlike the assassins in Baltimore, these had been vampires.

Five weeks into Abe's young presidency the country's strained "bonds of affection" finally broke.

Fort Sumter, a federal stronghold in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina, had been under siege by Confederates since January. The Southerners demanded that the Union troops (commanded by Major Robert Anderson) surrender the fort, as it was in South Carolina, and therefore not the property of the federal government. Abe had done everything in his power to prevent hostilities from breaking out, but Anderson's men were running desperately short of food, and the only way to resupply them was by sending warships into Confederate territory.

I am now forced to choose between two evils. Either I must allow a few soldiers to starve, or provoke a war that will undoubtedly kill scores of soldiers. Struggle as I might, I can see no third option.

Abe sent the ships.

The first of them reached Charleston Harbor on April 11th. The next morning, before sunrise, Confederate Colonel James Chestnut Jr. gave the order to fire on the fort.

It was the first shot of the Civil War.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

ELEVEN

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

Casualties

Fellow-citizens, we cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration, will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance, or insignificance, can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation.

—Abraham Lincoln, in a message to Congress
December 1st, 1862

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

I

On June 3rd, 1861, Stephen A. Douglas was found dead in a stairwell of his Chicago home.

I have just this hour heard the shocking news. Though the full facts have not yet come to light, I have no doubt that it is the work of vampires—and that I bear some of the responsibility for his murder.

Publicly, the cause of death was reported as typhoid fever, even though none of Douglas's friends remembered him feeling unwell the night before he was discovered. The body was taken by coach to Mercy Hospital, where it was examined by a young Chicago physician, Dr. Bradley Milliner. From the autopsy report:

Four small, circular puncture wounds on deceased's body—two on left shoulder directly over axillary [artery]; two the neck directly over right common carotid [artery]. Both sets surrounded by significant bruising; uniformly spaced one and one-half inches apart.Whole of deceased's body badly decayed and gray-blue in color; face is sunken; skin brittle, suggesting death occurred weeks or months before examination. Stomach contains brightly colored, whole pieces of undigested food, suggesting deceased ate shortly before death, and that death occurred less than twenty-four hours before examination.

Along with his observations, Dr. Milliner scribbled a single word in the report's margin:

"Incredible."

The report itself was deemed "inconclusive" and suppressed by Milliner's superiors, who thought that releasing such information would only add to the "climate of conjecture and suspicion" surrounding the senator's death. *

Lincoln and Douglas had been the most famous rivals in America. For two decades, they'd competed over everything from a woman's love to the highest office in the land. But for all their political antipathy, the two had grown to respect, even like, each other over the years. Douglas was, after all, one of Abe's "brilliant beacons" in Washington's "fog of fools." And while the so-called Little Giant spent years appealing to Southern passions, he was, in his heart, no son of the South. In fact, Douglas loathed the idea of disunion, going so far as to call secessionists "criminals," and

declaring: “We must fight for our country and forget our differences. There can be but two parties: the party of patriots and the party of traitors. We belong to the first.”

When the Union began to tear itself apart in the wake of his failed 1860 campaign, it was Stephen Douglas who first reached out to his old rival—the new president elect.

He wishes to join me in the cause of opposing secession. To that end I have asked him to make a speaking tour of the Border States and the Northwest (those places where the flame of unity might yet be fanned by our efforts, or snuffed out by a lack of them). I can think of no better messenger, no ally more symbolic of the need for unity. I will admit that his offer took me quite by surprise. I suppose it possible that he has come to regret his association with the vampire South, and is looking for some means of redemption. Whatever his reasons, I welcome his help.

Douglas made pro-Union speeches in three states before returning to Washington. At Abe’s inauguration, with the threat of assassination hanging in the air, he placed himself near the podium and declared, “If any man attacks Lincoln, he attacks me!” And on Sunday, April 14th, 1861, as Fort Sumter was being surrendered to the Confederates, Stephen Douglas was among the first to race to the White House.

He came today with no appointment, only to find that I was meeting with the Cabinet, and would be thus engaged for quite some time. [Presidential secretary John] Nicolay asked him to call again, but Judge Douglas flatly refused. When I had grown weary of hearing his familiar baritone shouting profanities in the hall, I swung my office door open and exclaimed, “By God, let the man in or we shall have two wars to fight!”

We met privately for an hour or more. I had never seen him in such a panicked state! “They will march headlong into Washington and kill me!” he cried. “Kill the lot of us! I demand to know what plans you have to combat this menace, sir!” I told him, in the calmest voice I could muster, the truth—that I was to call for 75,000 militia the next morning; that I was to suppress this rebellion with every power of my office and weapon in my arsenal. These reassurances, however, only seemed to deepen his panic. He urged me to call for three times that number. “Mr. President,” he said, “you do not know the dishonest purposes of those men as I do. You do not, and I say this with the deepest respect, sir, know the real enemy you face.”

“Oh, but I assure you, Mr. Douglas—I know them too well.”

Thanks to Henry, Abe had known about Douglas’s connection to Southern vampires since their Senate race three years earlier.

Douglas, however, never suspected that the gangly, graying man before him had once been the mightiest vampire hunter on the Mississippi.

I can scarcely describe his astonishment at hearing the word "vampires" pass my lips. Now, with the truth out at last, each of us told the other his story: I of my mother's death; of my years spent hunting vampires. Douglas of the fateful day when—as a young, ambitious Democrat in the Illinois State Legislature—he was approached by a pair of "sallow" men from the South. "It was then that I first learned of [vampires]," he said. "It was then that I first became intoxicated by their money and influence."

Douglas repaid their support by railing against abolitionists in the Senate and by using his natural talent for speechmaking to rally proslavery forces across the country. But he'd begun to question his vampire patrons in recent years.

"Why do they reject compromise with the North?" he asked. "Why do they seem intent on war at any cost? And why, by God, do they care so fervently for the institution [of slavery] at all? I could see no logic in it, and I could not, in good conscience, continue down the path to disunion."

It became clear that Douglas did not know the whole truth; clear that—while guilty of some small treachery—he could not be judged with the likes of the traitorous [Jefferson] Davis. Moved by his remorse, I determined to tell him all: the marriage of slavery and Southern vampires. Their plan to enslave all but the fortunate few of our kind; to keep us in cages and chains as we had kept the Negro. I told him of their plan to create a new America; a nation of vampires—free from oppression, free from darkness, and blessed with an abundance of living men to feast upon.

By the time I finished speaking, Douglas wept.

That night, Abe sat at the head of a long table in his office, with Secretary of State William Seward to his left. They were joined by the rest of the Cabinet, all of them anxious to hear why they'd been summoned from their supper tables and rushed back to the White House.

"Gentlemen," I said at last, "I wish to speak to you this evening about vampires."

Abe had met with his Cabinet on a near daily basis since the inauguration. They'd discussed every detail of the coming war: uniforms, supply lines, commanders, horses, provisions—everything but the truth of what they were really fighting for, and who they were really fighting against.

And yet I had asked these men to plan me a war! Was it not

akin to asking a group of blind men to pilot a steamboat?

The encounter with Douglas had changed Abe's mind. When they parted company that evening, he had ordered Nicolay to reconvene the Cabinet at once.

I thought it crucial that these men—these men who were to be my counsel through untold miseries—knew exactly what they faced. There would be no more revelations in this office. No more half-truths or omissions. Now, just as I had with Douglas, I would tell them the whole truth—with Seward there to endorse every word of it. My history. My hunting. My alliance with a small band of vampires called the Union, and the unthinkable consequences of the coming war.

Some were shocked to hear vampires spoken of at all. [Secretary of the Navy Gideon] Wells and [Secretary of the Treasury Salmon] Chase, it seemed, had managed to go the whole of their lives thinking them nothing more than myth. Wells sat in ashen silence. Chase, however, grew indignant. "I will not stand for folly in the face of war!" he declared. "I will not be summoned from my home to be made a fool for the president's amusement!" Seward rose to my defense, insisting that every word was true, and admitting his own complicity in keeping it from the rest of the Cabinet. Chase remained unconvinced.

He was not alone in his doubts. [Secretary of War Edwin] Stanton—who had long believed vampires real, but confined to the shadows—was the next to speak. "What sense can it make?" he asked. "Why would [Jefferson] Davis… why would any man conspire against himself? Why would any man hasten his own enslavement?"

"Davis has only his own survival in mind," I said. "He and his allies are pilot fish—cleaning the teeth of sharks to avoid being themselves bitten. Perhaps they have been promised power and riches in this new America, exemption from chains. But know this—whatever they have been promised is a lie."

Chase could bear it no longer. He rose from his seat and left the room. I waited for others to join him. Satisfied that none would, I continued.

"Even now," I said, "there is a part of me that finds it all impossible to believe. A part of me that expects to wake from a half-century's dream. Even after all these years, and all of the things I have witnessed. And why not? After all, to believe in vampires is to reject reason! To acknowledge a darkness that is not supposed to exist anymore. Not here, in this great age, where science has illuminated all but a few mysteries. No… no, that darkness belongs in the Old Testament; in the tragedies of

Shakespeare. But not here.

"That, gentlemen… that is why they thrive. That belief—that we live beyond the reach of darkness—is one that vampires have worked tirelessly to instill through the centuries. I submit to you that it is nothing less than the greatest lie ever sold to mankind."

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

II

Three days after the fall of Fort Sumter, Virginia seceded from the Union, and the Confederate capital was relocated to its industrial heart, Richmond. Over the next few weeks, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina followed. There were now eleven states in the Confederacy, with a combined population of nine million people (four million of which were slaves). Even so, most Northerners were convinced that the war would be a short one, and that the "sechers" (secessionists) would be stamped out by summer's end.

They had reason to be confident. The North, after all, had more than twice the population of the South. It had railroads that could speed troops and provisions to the battlefield in a fraction of the time; superior factories to supply boots and ammunition; warships to blockade ports and pound coastal cities. Pro-Union newspapers urged the president to bring about a "swift end to this unpleasantness." Cries of "Forward to Richmond!" were heard across the North. Henry Sturges agreed. In a telegram dated July 15th, he used a quote from Shakespeare to send Abe a coded message * : strike Richmond now.

Abraham,

"In God's name, cheerly on, courageous friends, to reap the harvest of perpetual peace, by this one bloody trial of sharp war." **

—H

Abe followed the advice. The day after receiving the letter, he ordered the largest fighting force ever assembled on North American soil—35,000 men—to march from Washington to Richmond under the command of Brigadier General Irvin McDowell. Most of McDowell's soldiers came from the 75,000 militiamen hurriedly called up in the wake of Fort Sumter. They were, for the most part, farmers and tradesmen. Baby-faced teenagers and frail old men. Some had never fired a shot in their lives.

McDowell complains that his men are inexperienced. "You are green," I told him, "but [the Confederates] are green also. You are all green alike! We must not wait for the enemy to come marching into Washington. We must meet him where he lives! To

Richmond, by God!"

To get there, McDowell and his men would have to march twenty-five miles south into Virginia, where General Pierre Beauregard and 20,000 Confederates were waiting for them. In the sweltering heat of Monday, July 21st, 1861, the two armies met near the town of Manassas. It would be remembered as the First Battle of Bull Run—so named for the little creek that would soon run red.

Two days after the battle, a Union private named Andrew Merrow wrote home to his new bride in Massachusetts. * His letter paints a gruesome picture of the day's events, and offers some of the earliest evidence that the Confederate Army had vampires in its ranks.

We had [the Confederates] whipped at the start. Blessed with greater numbers, we drove the devils south up Henry House Hill, and into a group of trees at its peak. What a sight to see them scatter like mice! To see our ranks spread half a mile wide! To hear the cracking of gunpowder from all directions! "Let us chase them all the way to Georgia!" cried Colonel Hunter, to the delight of the men.

As we neared the top of the hill, the rebels covered their retreat by firing on us. The gun smoke grew so thick that one could scarcely see ten yards into the trees where they hid. From behind this curtain of smoke suddenly came a chorus of wild yells. The voices of twenty or thirty men, growing louder by the moment. "First ranks! Fix bayonets!" ordered the colonel. As they did, a small band of Confederates emerged from the smoke, running toward us as fast as any men have ever run. Even from a distance, I could see their strange, wild eyes. There was not a rifle, or a pistol, or a sword among them.

Our first ranks began to fire, yet their rifles seemed to have no effect. Melissa, I shall swear until my grave that I saw bullets strike these men in their chests. In their limbs and faces. Yet they continued to charge as if they had not been hit at all! The rebels smashed into our ranks and tore men apart in front of my eyes. I do not mean to suggest that they ran them through with bayonets, or fired on them with revolvers. I mean to say that these rebels—these thirty unarmed men—tore one hundred men to pieces with nothing more than their bare hands. I saw arms pulled off. Heads twisted backward. I saw blood pour from the throats and bellies of men gutted by mere fingertips; a boy grasping at the holes where his eyes had been a moment before. A private three yards in front of me had his rifle plucked away. I was close enough to feel his blood on my face as its stock was

used to smash his skull in. Close enough to taste his death on my tongue.

Our lines broke. I am not ashamed to say that I dropped my rifle and ran with the others, Melissa. The rebels gave chase, overtaking and savaging men on either side of me as we retreated. Their screams following me down the hill.

Reports of similar "rebel charges" poured in from McDowell's commanders. "Well," he is rumored to have said (on learning that the Union was in full retreat), "we brought the superior army, but it seems they brought the superior men." McDowell had no idea that those "superior men" weren't men at all.

The fighting lasted a matter of hours. When the gun smoke gave way, more than a thousand men were dead, another three thousand severely or mortally wounded. From the diary of Union Major General Ambrose Burnside:

I rode past a small pond at dusk and saw men washing their wounds in it. The water had turned quite red as a result—but this did not deter the desperate from drinking it when they crawled to its edge. Near this, I saw the body of a rebel boy who had been hit by a shell. Only his arms, shoulders and head remained—his eyes open and face expressionless. A group of buzzards was gathered around him, picking at his entrails. Pecking at the bits of his brain that had spilled onto the ground. It is a sight that shall never leave me.

And yet I have seen a hundred such horrors this day. A man could walk a mile in any direction without his feet touching the ground—such are the number of bodies. Even as I write this, I hear the screams of the wounded on the air. Begging for help. For water. In some cases, begging for death.

I have no more fear of hell, for I have this day seen it with my own eyes.

The North was in a state of shock and mourning after Bull Run.

Had I only listened to Douglas! To McDowell! Had I only called for more men and given them more time to train—this war might be over, and the suffering and death of thousands avoided. It is clear, now, that the South means to compensate for her smaller numbers by sending vampires to the fields of battle. So be it. I have spent a lifetime hunting vampires with my ax. I shall now spend a little while longer hunting them with my army. If this is to be a long and costly struggle, then let us redouble our resolve to win it.

Once its shock subsided, the North took a cue from its president and dug its heels in. Men turned out in droves to enlist,

and states pledged new regiments and provisions. On July 22nd, 1861, the day he signed a bill calling for 500,000 new troops, Abraham Lincoln scribbled a prescient thought in his journal.

Let us pray now for the future dead. Though we do not yet know their names, we know that there shall be far too many of them.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

III

It had been a bitter, frustrating winter for the president and his Cabinet. With rivers frozen and roads covered with mud and snow, there was little either army could do but tend its fires and wait for the thaw. On February 9th, 1862, his 53rd birthday, Abe was in his office when the first sign of spring came at last.

I have just received word of [General Ulysses S.] Grant's success at Fort Henry in Tennessee. It is a crucial victory for us in the west, and a welcome change from these long months of waiting. Together with the sound of my rascals playing outside, it is a fine Sunday indeed!

"Rascals" Tad and Willie Lincoln—seven and ten years old, respectively—were the unquestioned life (some would say scourge) of the White House. The boys spent countless hours running rampant over the mansion and its grounds during the first year of their father's presidency, a fact that aggravated some of Abe's associates to no end, but offered the president a much-needed distraction from the stresses of running a country and a war.

The sound of my boys at play is (too often, I confess) the only joy between sunrise and sleep. I am therefore too happy to wrestle and chase them about whenever the opportunity presents itself—and regardless of who looks on. Not one week ago, [Iowa Senator James W.] Grimes walked into my office for an appointment, only to find me pinned to the floor by four boys: Tad and Willie holding my legs, Bud and Holly * my arms. "Senator," I said, "if you would be kind enough to negotiate the terms of my surrender." Mary thinks it beneath the dignity of a president to gambol so, but were it not for these moments—these tender little pieces of life—I should go mad in a month's time.

Abe was a doting, loving father to all three of his boys, but with Robert off at Harvard (where he was guarded by a handful of local men and vampires) and Tad "too young and wild to be still," he grew especially fond of Willie.

He has an insatiable appetite for books; a love of solving riddles. If there is a fight, he can be counted on to step in and make the peace. Some are eager to point to the similarities between us, but I do not see us as so very similar—for Willie has

a kinder heart than I, and a quicker mind.

As he celebrated the good news that Sunday afternoon, Abe happened to catch a glimpse of his boys playing on the frost-covered South Lawn below his office window.

Tad and Willie were busy holding a court-martial for Jack * as they often did—accusing him of this offense or that. Not ten yards from where they played, two young soldiers (not much more than boys themselves) looked after them—both of them shivering, no doubt wondering what they had done to deserve such an assignment.

They were just two of the dozen living guards who patrolled the White House and its grounds around the clock. At Abe's insistence, his wife and children were accompanied by no fewer than two men (or one vampire) whenever they ventured outdoors. There were no fences between the street and the mansion in 1862. The public was free to roam the grounds—even enter the mansion's first floor. As journalist Noah Brooks wrote, "the multitude, washed or unwashed, always has free egress and ingress." The multitude was not, however, permitted to carry firearms onto the property.

At half-past three o'clock, a small, bearded man with a rifle was spotted approaching the White House from the direction of Lafayette Square. The sentry assigned to the North Entrance leveled his weapon and ordered the man to stop—yelling at the top of his lungs.

FIG. 3A-1. - SOUTH LAWN OF THE WHITE HOUSE UNDER HEAVY GUARD, CIRCA 1862. THE MAN ON THE PORTICO IS BELIEVED TO BE A MEMBER OF ABES TRINITY.

The commotion drew me to the north windows, where I watched the little man continue his approach, a rifle held across his body. Guards came running now from every corner of the grounds, alerted, as we had been, by the repeated shouts of "stop at once or be shot!"

Three of these guards came running quite a bit faster than the others, and made straight for the intruder with no fear of being shot. At the sight of their advance (and, I suspect, their fangs), the little man at last dropped his rifle and raised his hands in the air. He was nonetheless brought violently to the ground, and his pockets searched by Lamon while the trinity held his limbs. I was later told that he seemed frightened; confused. "He gave me ten dollars," he supposedly said with tears in his eyes. "He gave me ten dollars."

Only now, with the immediate danger passed, did my eyes find two of the several soldiers now forming a circle around the

intruder.

Abe's heart stopped. They were the same young soldiers who'd been looking after Willie and Tad.

His children were alone.

The boys had been too engrossed to pay any mind to the shouting, or notice their shivering guards running off to investigate it. In this vulnerable moment, they were set upon by a stranger.

He, too, might have escaped their notice, had the heel of his boot not come down on their doll and brought an end to their game. Willie and Tad looked up to see a man of average height and build standing over them, wearing a long black coat, with a scarf and top hat to match. His eyes were obscured by dark glasses, and his lip obscured by a thick brown mustache. "Hello, Willie," he said. "I have a message for your father. I would very much like you to give it to him."

Now it was Tad's screams that brought the guards running.

The vampires were the first to arrive, with Lamon and several soldiers on their heels. I came bounding down the steps of the South Portico next, and found Tad frightened and crying, but seemingly unharmed. Willie, however, was rubbing his tongue with his coat sleeve and spitting repeatedly. I took him in my arms and looked him over—turning his face and neck this way, that way—all the while praying there were no wounds on his body.

"There!" Lamon cried, pointing to a figure running south. He and the trinity gave chase, while the others hastened us into the house. "Alive!" I cried after them. "Alive!"

Lamon and the trinity chased the figure across Pennsylvania Avenue and through the Ellipse. * When it became clear that he couldn't keep pace, the breathless Lamon drew his revolver and, with no regard for the innocent bystanders he might have hit, fired at the distant figure until his cartridges were spent.

The trinity was gaining on its target. The four vampires ran south toward the unfinished Washington Monument, into the field of grazing cattle that surrounded it. Construction of the massive marble obelisk (at 150 feet, it was only one-third its eventual height) had been halted, and a temporary slaughterhouse erected in its shadow to help meet the needs of a hungry army. It was into this long, wooden building that the stranger now disappeared, desperate to lose the killers who were only fifty yards behind him. Perhaps there would be knives to fight with inside… blood to throw them off his scent… anything.

But there were no carcasses in the slaughterhouse that

Sunday afternoon. No workers cutting the throats of cattle. Only dozens of metal hooks hanging from rafters overhead, each reflecting the late-day sun that squeezed through the open doors at both ends of the long building. The stranger ran across the bloodstained wooden floor looking for a place to hide, a weapon to wield. He found neither.

The river… I can lose them in the river…

He sprinted toward an open door at the far end, determined to head south to the Potomac. Once there, he would dive beneath its surface and slip away. But his exit was blocked by the silhouette of a man.

The other door…

The stranger stopped and turned back—there were two more silhouettes behind him.

There would be no escape.

He stood near the center of the long building as his pursuers advanced from either end, slowly, cautiously. They meant to capture him. Torture him. Demand to know who'd sent him, and what he'd done to the boy. And, if captured, chances were that he would tell them everything. This he could not allow.

The stranger smiled as his pursuers neared. "Know this," he said. "That you are the slaves of slaves." He took a breath, closed his eyes, and leapt onto one of the hanging hooks, stabbing himself through the heart.

I like to think that in his final moments, as his body convulsed and blood poured from his nose and mouth—joining that of the animals' below—that he saw the flames of hell beneath his feet, and felt the first of an eternity's agony. I like to think that he was afraid.

As guards sealed the White House and searched the grounds, Willie sat in his father's office, calmly relating what had happened, while a doctor looked him over.

The stranger had grabbed his face, he said, pried his mouth open, and poured something "bitter" into it. My thoughts turned at once to my mother's death from a fool's dose of vampire blood, and I fell into silent despair at the thought of seeing my beloved little boy suffer her fate. The doctor found no signs of injury or symptoms of poisoning, but made Willie swallow several spoonfuls of powdered charcoal * as a precaution (an experience he found far worse than the assault itself).

That night, as Mary tended to Tad (who had been quite shaken by the day's events), I sat by Willie's bedside, watching him sleep; watching him for the slightest sign of sickness. To my great relief, he seemed well the next morning, and I began to

entertain the faint hope that it had all been nothing more than a scare.

But as Monday wore on, Willie grew increasingly tired and sore—and by the second night, he was running a fever. All business ground to a halt as Willie grew worse, and the best doctors in Washington were summoned to treat him.

They did all they could to treat his symptoms, but could find no cure for them. For three days and nights, Mary and I kept a vigil at his bedside, praying for his recovery, fervent in our belief that youth and Providence would see him through. I read him passages from his favorite books as he slept; ran my fingers though his soft brown hair and wiped the sweat from his brow. On the fourth day, our prayers seemed answered. Willie began to mend on his own, and my faint hopes returned. It could not be a fool's dose, I told myself—for he would surely be dead by now.

But after a few hours' reprieve, Willie's health began to worsen again. He couldn't eat or drink without being sick to his stomach. His body withered and weakened, and his fever refused to subside. On the ninth day, he could not be roused from sleep. And on the tenth, despite the best efforts of the best physicians available, it became clear that Willie was going to die.

Mary could not bring herself to hold another of our little boys as he left this earth. It fell to me to cradle our sleeping son against my chest and gently rock him through the night… through the next morning… and through the day that followed. I refused to let him go; refused to let go of that faintest hope that God would not be so cruel.

On Thursday, February 20th, 1862, at five p.m., Willie Lincoln died in his father's arms.

FIG. 19-1. - MARY TODD LINCOLN POSES WITH TWO OF THE THREE SONS OF SHE WOULD LIVE TO BURY - WILLIE (LEFT) AND TAD (RIGHT).

Elizabeth Keckley was a freed slave who worked mainly as Mary Lincoln's dressmaker. Years later, she recalled the sight of Lincoln weeping openly, his tall frame convulsing with emotion. "Genius and greatness," she said, "weeping over love's idol lost." John Nicolay remembered the tough, towering president walking to his office door "as if in some trance." "Well, Nicolay," he said, staring off into space, "my boy is gone… he is actually gone." Abe barely made it into his office before bursting into tears.

For the next four days, Abe conducted little government business. He did, however, fill nearly two dozen pages in his journal. Some of them with lamentations…

[Willie] will never know the tender touch of a woman, or

experience those particular joys of a first love. He will never know the complete peace of holding his own tiny son in his arms. He will never read the great works of literature, or see the great cities of the world. He will never see another sunrise, or feel another drop of rain against his sweet face…

Others with thoughts of suicide…

I have come to believe that the only peace in this life is the end of it. Let me wake at last from this nightmare… this brief, meaningless nightmare of loss and struggle. Of endless sacrifice. All that I love waits on the other side of death. Let me find the courage to open my eyes at last.

And sometimes, with blind rage…

I wish to see the face of the cowardly God who delights in these miseries! Who delights in striking down children! In stealing innocent sons from their mothers and fathers! Oh, let me see his face and rip out his black heart! Let me strike him down as I have so many of his demons!

Arrangements were made to transport Willie's body to Springfield, where it would be buried near the Lincolns' permanent home. But Abe couldn't bear the idea of having his little boy so far away, and at the last minute it was decided that Willie would lie in a Washington crypt until the end of his father's presidency. Two days after the funeral (which Mary, overcome with grief, could not attend), Abe returned to the crypt and ordered his son's casket opened.

I sat beside him, as I had on so many nights during his brief life; half expecting him to wake and embrace me—for such was the skill of his embalmer, that he seemed merely asleep. I stayed with him an hour or more, speaking to him tenderly. Laughing as I told him stories of his earliest mischief… his first steps… his peculiar laugh. Telling him how very loved he would always be. When our time was through, and the lid again affixed to his coffin, I began to weep. I could not bear the thought of his being alone in that cold, dark box. Alone where I could not comfort him.

With Mary confined to bed, Abe sought refuge behind his closed office door in the week after Willie's death. Fearing for his health, Nicolay and Hay canceled all of his meetings indefinitely, and Lamon and the trinity guarded his door at all hours. Dozens of well-wishers came to offer the president their sympathies that week. All were thanked and politely turned away—until the night of February 28th, when one man was ushered directly into his office.

He'd given the name that could never be refused.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

IV

"I cannot imagine the burden you bear," said Henry. "The weight of a nation on your shoulders… of a war. And now, the weight of another son buried."

Abe sat in the light of the fireplace, his old ax hanging above its mantle. "Is this why you come, Henry? To remind me of my miseries? If that be the case, then I assure you—I am too aware of them already."

"I come to offer my sympathies to an old friend… and to offer you a choi—"

"No!" Abe choked up at once. "I will not hear it! I will not be tormented with this again!"

"It is not my wish to torment."

"Then what is it, Henry? Tell me—what is your wish? To see me suffer? To see the tears run freely down my cheeks? Here—does this face satisfy you?"

"Abraham…"

Abe rose from his chair. "The whole of my life has been spent on your errands, Henry! The whole of my life! And to what end? To what happiness of my own? All that I have ever loved has fallen prey to your kind! I have given you everything. What have you given me in return?"

"I have given you my everlasting loyalty; my protection from the—"

"Death!" said Abe. "You have given me death!"

Abe looked at the ax over his mantle.

All that I have ever loved…

"Abraham… do not give in to this despair. Remember your mother—remember what she whispered with her dying breath."

"Do not try to manipulate me, Henry! And do not pretend to care that I suffer! You care only for your own gains! For your war! You know nothing of loss!"

Now Henry rose to his feet. "I have spent these three hundred years mourning a wife and child, Abraham! Mourning the life that was stolen from me; a thousand loves lost to time! You know nothing of the lengths I have gone to protect you! Nothing of that which I have suff—"

Henry composed himself.

“No,” he said. “No… it mustn’t be this way. We have come too far for this.” He grabbed his coat and hat. “You have my respects, and you have my offer. If you choose to leave Willie buried, so be it.”

The sound of Willie’s name roused such wildness in me—Henry’s callous tone such rage that I grabbed the ax from its perch and swung at his head with a scream, missing him by less than an inch, and shattering the clock on the mantle. I recovered and swung again, but Henry leapt over my blade. The office door now flew open behind us, and two of the trinity rushed in. On seeing us, they froze—unsure of where their loyalties lay. Lamon, however, was plagued by no such uncertainty. On entering, he drew his revolver and aimed it at Henry—only to have it taken by one of the vampires before he could fire.

Henry stood in the center of the room, arms at his sides. I charged again—raising my ax as I ran. Henry didn’t so much as blink as I came. Rather, he grabbed the handle as I brought it down on his head, took it from me, and snapped it in two, throwing the pieces on the floor. I came at him with my fists, but these he caught as well, twisting them around and forcing me to my knees. Holding me thus, he knelt behind me and brought his fangs to my neck. “No!” cried Lamon, rushing forward. The others held him back. I felt the tips of those twin razors against my flesh.

“Do it!” I cried.

The only peace in this life is the end of it…

“Do it, I beg you!”

I felt the tiny trickles of blood run down my neck as his fangs broke through my skin. I closed my eyes and prepared to meet the unknown; to see my beloved boys once more… but it was not to be.

Henry withdrew his fangs and let me go.

“Some people are just too interesting to kill, Abraham,” he said, rising to his feet. He gathered his coat and hat again and walked to the door, toward the three anxious guards whose hearts were racing faster than my own.

“Henry…”

He turned back.

“I will see this war to its end… but I do not care to see another vampire so long as I live.”

Henry offered a slight bow. “Mr. President…”

With that, he disappeared.

Abe wouldn’t see him for the rest of his life.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

TWELVE

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

“Starve the Devils”

Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue… until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

—Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address
March 4th, 1865

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

I

Washington, D.C., was under attack, and Abe wasn't about to miss his chance to see the fighting up close.

On July 11th, 1864, ignoring the pleas of his personal guard, he rode alone on horseback to Fort Stevens, * where Confederate General Jubal A. Early was leading 17,000 rebels in a brazen assault on Washington's northern defenses. The president was greeted by Union officers and whisked directly into the fort, where he would be able to relax and enjoy a cool drink behind the safety of its thick stone walls.

I hadn't come to be coddled or hear the battle described to me—I'd come to see the horrors of war for myself. To see what others had suffered these three long years, while I had remained behind the walls of warmth and plenty. Try as they might, the officers couldn't discourage me from peeking over the parapet to watch boys line up and ceremoniously shoot one another—to see them blown apart by [cannon fire] and run through by bayonets.

The sight of Abraham Lincoln towering over the battlefield in his stovepipe hat must have seemed a godsend for the rebel sharpshooters at Fort Stevens that day. Abe had three bullets zip past him in as many minutes, each one giving his minders terrible fits of anxiety. Finally, when a Union officer standing next to him was struck in the head and killed, the president felt a tug at the bottom of his coat, and heard First Lieutenant (and future Supreme Court Justice) Oliver Wendell Holmes yell: "Get down, you damned fool!"

But he didn't.

He'd completely lost his fear of death.

There were no more vampires at the White House. Abe had banished them in the wake of Willie's death and his confrontation with Henry. Even the trinity—his most capable and ferocious protectors—had been sent back to New York.

I shall save this Union because it merits saving. I shall save it to honor the men who built it with their blood and genius, and the future generations who deserve its liberty. I shall give every miserable hour to the cause of victory and peace—but I shall be damned if I lay eyes on another vampire.

The first family was now guarded exclusively by living men,

and the president guarded less and less at his own insistence. Each day brought new restrictions on his guards; each day fewer rooms he welcomed them in. Over Ward Hill Lamon's objections, Abe insisted on riding out in an open carriage when the weather was agreeable, and on walking between the mansion and the War Department alone after dark. As Lamon recalled in his memoirs years later: "I believe that it was more than an absence of fear. I believe that it was an invitation of death."

A journal entry from April 20th, 1862, sums up Abe's growing fatalism.

In the course of a week, I greet a thousand strange faces in the White House. Should I treat each as the face of my assassin? Indeed, any man willing to give his life to take mine would have little trouble doing it. Am I therefore to lock myself in an iron box and wait for this war to end? If God wants my soul, He knows where He may collect it—and He may do so at the hour and in the manner of His choosing.

In time, through sheer force of will, he would pull himself out of this depression, just as he had all the ones before it. Not long after Willie's death, when his longtime friend William McCullough was killed fighting for the Union, Abe sent a letter to the grieving daughter McCullough had left behind. The comfort and advice he offered was meant as much for himself as for the girl.

Perfect relief is not possible, except with time. You cannot now realize that you will ever feel better. Is not this so? And yet it is a mistake. You are sure to be happy again. To know this, which is certainly true, will make you some less miserable now. I have had experience enough to know what I say; and you need only to believe it, to feel better at once. The memory of your dear Father, instead of an agony, will yet be a sad sweet feeling in your heart, of a purer and holier sort than you have known before.

But while Abe was picking himself up and soldiering on, Mary was only getting worse.

She cannot bring herself to leave her bed for more than an hour's time. Nor can she attend to Tad, who grieves not only for a brother, but a mother as well. I am ashamed to admit that there are moments when the very sight of her angers me. Ashamed because it is no fault of hers that she suffers fits of rage, or believes the charlatans who "commune" with our beloved sons for money. She has borne more than any mother ought to bear. I fear that her mind has gone, and that it shall never return.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

II

Though Abe refused to have any direct contact with Henry or the Union, he was pragmatic enough to accept their help in winning the war. In New York, the grand ballroom (where Abe first learned of the Union and its plans for him) had been transformed into a war room, complete with maps, chalkboards, and a telegraph. They acted as envoys to the sympathetic vampires of Europe. They fought where they were able, and supplemented the White House's intelligence with that collected by their own spies. This intelligence was delivered to Seward, who—after reading and burning the messages—related their contents to the president. From an entry dated June 10th, 1862:

Today comes word that the Confederates are handing Union prisoners over to Southern vampires for the purpose of torture and execution. "We hear of men," said Seward, "hung upside down and stretched between posts. Using a logger's saw, two vampires slowly cut the prisoner in half beginning at his [groin]. As they do, a third vampire lies on his back beneath the poor wretch—catching the blood that runs down his body. Because the prisoner's head is nearest the ground, his brain remains nourished, and he remains conscious until the blade tears slowly back and forth through his stomach, then chest. The other prisoners are made to watch this before being made to suffer it themselves."

Rumors of Confederate "ghosts" and "demons" snatching men from their tents and drinking their blood spread through the Union ranks during the war's second summer. Soldiers could be heard singing a popular song around their campfires at night.

From Flor'da to Virginny you can hear him revel,
for ol' Johnny Reb's made a deal with the devil.
Sent him up north, that snake-eyed liar,
to drag us boys off to the lake of fire…

In at least one case, these rumors led a group of Union soldiers to turn on one of their own. On July 5th, 1862, Private Morgan Sloss was murdered by five of his fellow soldiers while encamped near Berkley Plantation in Virginia.

They pulled him from his tent in the dead of night and beat him, all the while accusing him of being a "blood-drinkin'

demon." (Had the boy actually been a vampire, he would have made a better show of defending himself.) They tied him to a hitching post, and set on him with sticks and shovels—demanding he confess. "Tell us yer a blood-drinkin' demon and we'll let ya go!" they cried, all the while thrashing him till he wept and begged for mercy. After a quarter of an hour of this, the mumbled confession at last came from his bloodied lips. I suspect the boy would have confessed to being Christ Himself if it had meant an end to his agony. His confession noted, he was then doused in lamp oil and burned alive. The fear he must have felt… the confusion and the fear… I cannot think of it without my fists clenching in anger. If only by some miracle of time and heaven I could have been there to intervene.

Abe found the incident deeply troubling—not only for its cruelty, but because it meant that the Confederate strategy was working.

How can we hope to win this war when our men have begun killing each other? How can we hope to prevail when they will soon be too frightened to fight? For every vampire sympathetic to our cause, there are ten fighting for the enemy. How am I to contest them?

As it often did for Abe, the answer came in a dream. From an entry dated July 21st, 1862:

I was a boy again… sitting atop a familiar fence rail in the cool of a cloudy day, watching travelers pass on the Old Cumberland Trail. I remember seeing a horse cart filled with Negroes, each of them shackled at the wrist, without so much as a handful of loose hay to comfort the bumps of the road, or a blanket to relieve them from the winter air. My eyes met those of the youngest, a Negro girl of perhaps five or six, as they passed. I wanted to turn away (such was the sorrow of her countenance), yet I could not… for I knew where she was being taken.

Night had fallen. I had followed the Negro girl (I know not how) to a large barn—the inside lit by torches and hanging oil lamps. I watched from the darkness as she and the others were made to stand in a line, their eyes firmly fixed on the ground. I watched as a vampire took its place behind each of the slaves. Her eyes found mine as a pair of fangs descended behind her, and a pair of clawed hands grabbed her tiny neck.

"Justice… ," she said, staring at me.

The fangs tore into her.

Her screams joined my own as I woke.

Abe convened his Cabinet the next morning.

"Gentlemen," I began, "we have spoken a great deal about

the true nature of this war; about our true enemy. We have argued—always in the spirit of friendship—over the wisest way to meet such an enemy, and bemoaned his power to strike fear into the hearts of our men. I daresay that we have even come to share in that fear ourselves. This will not do.

"Gentlemen… let our enemy fear us.

"Let us deny him the laborers who tend the farms of his living allies; who build his garrisons and carry his gunpowder. Let us deny him the poor wretches who are themselves grown as crops to be consumed by darkness. Now, gentlemen, let us starve the devils into defeat by declaring every slave in the South free."

Cheers went up around the table. Even Salmon Chase (who still refused to believe that vampires were real) saw the strategic genius of attacking the engine of the South. Seward, while joining the others in his approval, offered a piece of humble advice:

[He] suggested that such a proclamation be given to the country on the heels of a victory, so as not to appear an act of desperation.

"Well," I said, "then I suppose we need a victory."

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

III

On September 17th, 1862, the Union and Confederate armies collided at Antietam Creek, near the town of Sharpsburg, Maryland. The Confederate forces were commanded by General Robert E. Lee, who'd enjoyed a warm relationship with the president before the war. The Union forces were commanded by General George B. McClellan, a Democrat who despised Abraham Lincoln with every fiber of his being. Abe writes:

[McClellan] thinks me a buffoon—unfit to command a man of his superior breeding and intellect. This would not bother me in the least if only he won more battles! Instead he sits in his camp, using the Army of the Potomac as his personal bodyguard! He suffers from an excess of caution: observing when he should attack, retreating when he should stand his ground and fight. This is a sin that I cannot forgive in a general.

Lee and McClellan's armies waited quietly in the predawn hours of that Wednesday, September 17th, unaware that they were about to embark on the bloodiest day in American military history. At first light, both sides unleashed their artillery. For nearly an hour the shells flew one after the other, many with fuses timed to make them explode over their targets, sending burning pieces of shrapnel through the bodies of any soldier unfortunate enough to be nearby. From the diary of Union soldier Christoph Niederer, * 20th New York Infantry, 6th Corps:

I had just got myself pretty comfortable when a bomb burst over me and completely deafened me. I felt a blow on my right shoulder and my jacket was covered with white stuff. I felt mechanically whether I still had my arm and thank God it was still whole. At the same time I felt something damp on my face; I wiped it off. It was bloody. Now I first saw that the man next to me, Kessler, lacked the upper part of his head, and almost all his brains had gone into the face of the man next to him, Merkel, so that he could scarcely see. Since any moment the same could happen to anyone, no one thought much about it.

When the cannons fell quiet, Union troops were given orders to fix bayonets and charge across an open cornfield toward the entrenched Confederates. But an artillery battery was waiting for them in the tall stalks, and when they neared, the rebel cannons

unleashed round after round of grapeshot, * taking heads off and scattering body parts across the field. From a letter by Lieutenant Sebastian Duncan Jr., ** 13th New Jersey Infantry, 12th Corps:

Stray shot and shell began to whiz over our heads and burst around us… lying just in front of our lines was a great number of dead and wounded. One poor fellow lay just before us with one leg shot off; the other shattered and otherwise badly wounded; fairly shrieking with pain.

When the charge was over, the cornfield was a bare, smoldering ruin covered with the dead and the dying from one end to the other. The wounded were left to suffer alone as shells continued to fall—taking fresh limbs, and scattering the ones that had been taken already. The battle was barely two hours old.

More than 6,000 men would lose their lives at Antietam that day, and another 20,000 would be wounded, many of them mortally.

Lee would eventually be forced into retreat. But after using only two-thirds of his available forces to fight the battle (a fact that continues to baffle military historians), General George B. McClellan simply watched as the battered Confederate Army limped into Virginia to regroup. Had he chased them down, he could have dealt a crippling blow to the South and brought the war to a speedy end.

Abe was furious.

“Damn it!” he cried to Stanton on learning that McClellan had failed to follow the enemy’s retreat. “He has done more to cause me grief than any Confederate!”

He left for McClellan’s camp at Sharpsburg at once.

There’s a famous photograph of Abraham Lincoln and George B. McClellan sitting across from each other in the general’s tent at Sharpsburg. Both look stiff and uncomfortable. History knows that Abe flippantly told McClellan: “If you do not want to use the army, I would very much like to borrow it.” What history has never known, however, is what happened shortly before that uncomfortable picture was taken.

Upon greeting [McClellan] in his tent and shaking the hands of his officers, I asked that we be given a moment alone. Closing the flap of his tent, I placed my hat upon a small table, straightened my coat, and stood before him. “General,” I said, “I must ask you a question.”

“Anything,” said he.

I grabbed him by the collar and pulled him close—so close that our faces were only inches apart. “May I see them?”

“What in God’s name are you talking about?”

FIG. 8-47. - ABE SITS WITH A NERVOUS GENERAL GEORGE MCCLELLAN IMMEDIATELY AFTER THEIR CONFORNATION AT SHARPSBURG. NOTE THE AXE LEANING AGAINST THE PRESIDENT'S CHAIR -- BROUGHT JUST IN CASE HIS HUNCH ABOUT MCCLELLAN HAD PROVEN RIGHT.

I pulled him closer still. "Your fangs, General! Let me have a look at them!" McClellan began to struggle against me, but his feet were no longer touching the ground. "Surely they must be in there," I said, prying his mouth open with one hand. "For how could any living man seek to prolong the agony of war? Come! Show me those black eyes! Show me those razors and let us face each other!" I shook him violently. "Show me!"

"I—I do not understand," he said at last.

His confusion was genuine. His fear palpable.

I released him, suddenly ashamed that I had allowed my temper to run wild. "No," I said. "No, I can see that you do not." I straightened my coat again and reached for the tent flap.

"Come," I said. "Let us give Gardner * his photograph and be done with each other."

Abe relieved McClellan of his command a month later.

After leaving the camp at Sharpsburg, Abe surveyed the aftermath of the battle for himself. The sight of mangled, rigid bodies strewn across Antietam Creek was enough to bring the emotionally weary president to tears.

I wept, for each of these boys was Willie. Each of them had left a father cursed as I am cursed; a mother weeping as Mary weeps.

Abe sat on the ground beside the corpse of one Union soldier for nearly an hour. He was told that the boy had been struck in the head by cannon fire.

His head was split open at the back, and most of his skull and brains were gone—the result being that his face and scalp lay flat on the ground like an empty bag of grain. The sight of him repulsed me, yet I could not avert my eyes. This boy—this nameless boy—had risen that September morning, unaware that he would never see another. He had dressed and eaten. He had run bravely into battle. And then he had been gone—every moment of his life reduced to a single misfortune. All of his experiences, past and future, emptied onto some strange field far from home.

FIG. 27-C - A GROUP OF FREED SLAVES COLLECTS CONFEDERATE BODIES IN COLD HARBOR, VIRGINIA AFTER THE WAR IN 1865. NOTE THE FANGS VISIBLE IN THE SKULL TO THE KNEELING MAN'S LEFT.

I weep for his mother and father; for his brothers and sisters. But I do not weep for him—for I have come to believe that old saying with all my heart…

"Only the dead have seen the end of war."

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

IV

As horrible as Antietam was, it was the victory that Abe had been waiting for. On September 22nd, 1862, he issued the first Emancipation Proclamation, declaring all slaves in rebel states "forever free."

Reaction was swift. Abolitionists argued that by freeing only the slaves in Southern states, Abe hadn't gone far enough. Moderates feared that the measure would only make the South fight with more determination. Some Northern soldiers threatened mutiny, arguing that they were fighting to preserve the Union, not "[Negro] freedom."

Abe didn't care.

The only reaction that concerned him was that of the slaves themselves. And judging by the reports that began trickling in during the last months of 1862, it was precisely the one he'd hoped for.

I received today a remarkable account from our allies in New York (related by Seward) of a recent uprising on a plantation near Vicksburg, Mississippi. I am assured that no part of it has been embellished, the account having been conveyed by a runaway Negro boy who witnessed the events firsthand. "The happy news of [the Emancipation Proclamation] having reached their quarters that morning," said Seward, "the Negroes rejoiced with spirited songs. Their revels, however, were met with the angry whips of their masters, and a wench collected and chained at the ankles—this being the common manner of taking away those who were never to be seen again. Rather than allow this sorry fate to befall her, as they had allowed it to befall so many before, the Negroes formed a mob and encircled the fattening pen into which she had been taken. When they burst in, carrying sickles and scythes, they were met with a sight which made even the bravest of them cry out in horror. A pair of wild-eyed gentlemen knelt over the shackled wench, each of their bloodstained mouths affixed to one of her naked breasts. She was insensible, most of the color having left her by this time. Composing themselves, several of the Negro men raised their weapons and charged at the devils—thinking them mortals. The vampires, however, moved with such speed as to confound them. They leapt about the pen, clinging to the walls

with the ease of insects, as blades swung violently about them. Those who led the charge were slain—their throats opened by pointed claws; their heads struck with such force as to render them dead before they fell. But such were their numbers, that the mob was able to overwhelm the gentlemen. Though it took no fewer than six men to restrain each of them, the vampires were finally dragged from the fattening pen, held over a watering trough, and beheaded."

FIG. 11.2 - ABE'S HOPES WERE REALIZED WHEN SLAVES BEGAN REVOLTING AGAINST THEIR VAMPIRE CAPTIONS IN THE WAKE OF THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION.

Word was spreading. The days of America's vampires were numbered.

On November 19th, 1863, Abe rose before a crowd of 15,000. He pulled a small piece of paper from his pocket, unfolded it, cleared his throat, and began to speak:

Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal…

He'd come to Gettysburg to dedicate a memorial to the 8,000 men who had given their lives in the three-day Union victory. As he spoke, Ward Hill Lamon (who can be seen sitting next to Abe in one of the few surviving photos of the event) scanned the crowd anxiously—his hand on the revolver inside his coat; his stomach in knots—for he was the only man protecting the president that day.

For three hours we sat upon that stage. Three hours of ceaseless worry—for I was certain that an assassin would strike. Every face seemed to wear an expression of hatred for the president. Every movement seemed prelude to an attempt on his life.

At first, Abe had insisted on going to Gettysburg without any guard, worried that the sight of armed men would be "inappropriate" at an event honoring those who'd died for their country. Only after Lamon half-jokingly threatened to sabotage the president's train to prevent the trip did Abe agree to bring him along.

… that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Abe folded the paper and took his seat to moderate applause. He'd spoken for all of two minutes. In that short time, he'd given perhaps the greatest speech of the nineteenth century, one that

would be forever ingrained in America's consciousness. And in that short time, Ward Hill Lamon, Abraham Lincoln's most devoted human bodyguard, had reached a decision that would forever alter the course of America's history.

FIG. 14C-3. - WARD HILL LAMON SITS IMMEDIATELY TO ABE'S RGHT IN THE MOMENTS AFTER THE GETTYSBURG ADDRESS, NERVOUSLY SCANNING THE CROWD FOR VAMPIRE ASSASSINS. A CLOSER LOOK AT THE EDGE OF THE PHOTO SUGGESTS THAT HIS FEARS MAY HAVE BEEN JUSTIFIED.

The anxiety at Gettysburg had been more than he could bear. As they rode back to Washington, Lamon respectfully told the president that he could no longer guard him.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

V

On the night of November 8th, 1864, Abe walked though driving wind and rain, alone.

I resolved to sit in the telegraph office alone and await the returns, just as I had in Springfield four long years ago. If I lost, I did not wish to be consoled. If I won, I did not wish to be congratulated. For there were many reasons to welcome the first outcome, and mourn the second.

The war had claimed nearly 500,000 lives by Election Day. Despite these unimaginable losses, growing war-weariness, and deep divides over emancipation in the North, Abe and his new vice president, Democrat Andrew Johnson of Tennessee, won in a landslide against George B. McClellan (the same McClellan Abe had confronted after Antietam). Eighty percent of the Union Army voted to reelect its commander in chief, an astonishing number given the fact that Abe had run against a former Union general, and given the miserable conditions they'd endured for years. On hearing the election results, Union troops outside the Confederate capital of Richmond gave such a cheer that its beleaguered citizens were sure the South had just surrendered.

They had reason to expect defeat. Richmond had been surrounded for months. Atlanta (the heart of Southern manufacturing) had been captured. Across the South, emancipated slaves continued to escape to Northern lines by the tens of thousands—crippling Southern agriculture, and forcing Confederate vampires to scavenge for easy blood. As a result, the dreaded "ghost soldiers" who had slaughtered and terrorized Union troops became increasingly scarce. By the time Abe was inaugurated for the second time on March 4th, 1865, the war was all but over.

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

During the procession that followed his address, a battalion of Negro soldiers joined the others marching past the president's

reviewing stand.

I was moved to tears as they passed, saluting me—for in each of their faces I saw the face of a nameless victim crying out for justice; of a little girl passing by on the Old Cumberland Trail all those many years ago. On each of their faces I saw the anguish of the past, and the promise of the future.

General Robert E. Lee surrendered his army on April 9th, 1865, effectively ending the Civil War. The following day, Abe received a letter in a familiar scrawl.

Abraham,

I beg you put enmity aside long enough to read a few words of congratulations.

It brings me joy to report that our enemy has begun its exodus—many back to Europe, others to South America and the Orient, where they are less likely to be hunted. They have looked to the future, Abraham—and they have seen that America is now, and shall forever be, a nation of living men. Like your namesake, you have been a "father to many" these four long years. And like your namesake, God has asked impossible sacrifices of you. Yet you have endured it all as brilliantly as any man could have hoped. You have blessed the futures of those who share this time on earth, and those who have yet to live.

She would be proud.

Ever,

—H

As a boy, Abe had vowed to "kill every vampire in America." While that had proven impossible, he'd done the next best thing: he'd driven the worst of them out of America. There was one vampire, however, who refused to leave… who believed that the dream of a nation of immortals was still within reach—so long as Abraham Lincoln was dead.

His name was John Wilkes Booth.

FIG. 3E - JOHN WILKES BOOTH (SEATED) POSES FOR A PORTRAIT WITH CONFEDERATE PRESIDENT JEFFERSON DAVIS IN RICHMOND, CIRCA 1863. IT IS ONLY KNOWN PICTURE OF BOOTH IN HIS TRUE VAMPIRE FORM.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

THIRTEEN

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

Thus Always to Tyrants

I leave you, hoping that the lamp of liberty will burn in your bosoms until there shall no longer be a doubt that all men are created free and equal.

—Abraham Lincoln, in a speech at Chicago, Illinois
July 10th, 1858

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

I

On April 12th, 1865, a lone man walked across the White House lawn toward the towering columns of the South Portico—where, on clear spring afternoons such as this, the president himself could often be seen on the third-floor balcony. The man walked briskly, carrying a small leather attaché. The legislation that would create the Secret Service was sitting on Abraham Lincoln's desk that Wednesday evening, and would remain there for the rest of his life.

At three minutes before four o'clock, the man entered the building and gave his name to one of the butlers.

"Joshua Speed, to see the president."

A lifetime of war had finally taken its toll on Abe. He'd felt increasingly weak since Willie's death. Clouded and unsure. The lines in his face were deeper, and the skin beneath his eyes sagged so as to make him appear forever exhausted. Mary was nearly always depressed, and her rare moments of levity were spent on frenzied fits of decorating and redecorating, or on séances to "commune" with her beloved Eddy and Willie. She and Abe hardly spoke beyond simple civilities. Sometime between April 3rd and April 5th, during his journey downriver to inspect the fallen city of Richmond, the president scribbled the following poem in the margins of his journal.

Melancholy,
my old friend,
visits frequent,
once again.

Desperate for distraction and companionship, Abe invited his old friend and fellow vampire hunter to spend a night at the White House. Upon being notified of Speed's arrival, Abe politely excused himself from a meeting and hurried into the reception room. Speed recalled Abe's entrance in a letter to fellow hunter William Seward after the president's death.

Placing his right hand upon my shoulder, the president paused momentarily as our faces met. I daresay he found mine surprised and saddened, for when I studied him, I saw a frailty that I had never encountered before. Gone was the broad-shouldered giant who could drive an ax clean through a vampire's

middle. Gone were the smiling eyes and confident air. In their place was a hunched, gaunt gentleman whose skin had taken on a sickly pallor, and whose features belonged to a man twenty years his senior. “My dear Speed,” he said, and took me into his arms.

The two hunters dined alone, Mary having confined herself to bed with a headache. After dinner, they retired to Abe’s office, where they remained well into the early morning hours, laughing and reminiscing as if they were above the store in Springfield again. They spoke of their hunting days; of the war; of the rumors that vampires were fleeing America in droves. But most of all, they talked of nothing: their families; their businesses; the miracle of photography.

It was precisely as I had hoped. My troubles were distant, my thoughts quieted, and I felt something like my old self again—if only for those ephemeral hours.

Sometime well after midnight, after Abe had kept his friend laughing with his bottomless well of anecdotes, he told him about a dream. A dream that had been troubling him for days. In one of his final journal entries, Lincoln recorded it for posterity.

There seemed to be a death-like stillness about me. Then I heard subdued sobs, as if a number of people were weeping. I left my bed and wandered downstairs. There the silence was broken by the same pitiful sobbing, but the mourners were invisible. I went from room to room; no living person was in sight, but the same mournful sounds of distress met me as I passed along… I was puzzled and alarmed. What could be the meaning of all this? I kept on until I arrived at the East Room, which I entered. There I met with a sickening surprise. Before me was a catafalque, on which rested a corpse wrapped in funeral vestments. Around it were stationed soldiers who were acting as guards; and there was a throng of people, gazing mournfully upon the corpse, whose face was covered, others weeping pitifully. “Who is dead in the White House?” I demanded of one of the soldiers, “The president,” was his answer; “he was killed by an assassin.” Then came a loud burst of grief from the crowd, which woke me from my dream. I slept no more that night.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

II

John Wilkes Booth loathed sunlight. It irritated his skin; overwhelmed his eyes. It made the fat, pink faces of boastful Northerners blinding as they passed him on the street, crowing about Union victories, celebrating the end of the "rebellion." You have no idea what this war is about. The twenty-six-year-old had always preferred the darkness—even before he became its servant. His home had always been the stage. Its braided ropes and velvet curtains. Its warm, gaslight glow. Theater had been the center of his life, and it was a theater he entered just before noon to collect his mail. There would no doubt be letters from admiring fans—perhaps someone who had witnessed his legendary Marc Antony in New York, or thrilled to his more recent Pescara in The Apostate, performed on the very boards now beneath his boots.

The backstage loading door had been opened to allow daylight in, as had the exits in the rear of the house, but Ford's Theater remained mostly dark. The first and second balconies were draped in shadow, and every time Booth's heel landed on the stage, the resulting echoes filled the emptiness. There was no place more pleasing—more natural to him than this. Booth would often pass the daylight hours in darkened theaters, sleeping on a catwalk, reading in an upper balcony by candlelight, or rehearsing for an audience of ghosts. An empty theater is a promise. Isn't that what they said? An empty theater is a promise unfulfilled. In a few hours, everything around him would be light and noise. Laughter and applause. Colorful people packed together in their colorful finery. Tonight, the promise would be fulfilled. And then, after the curtain came down and the gaslights were snuffed out, there would be darkness again. That was the beauty of it. That was theater.

Booth noticed a pair of men working in the stage left boxes, about ten feet above his head. They were removing the partition between two smaller boxes in order to make a single large one, no doubt for a person of some import. He recognized one of the stagehands as Edmund Spangler, a callused, red-faced old acquaintance and frequent employee. "And who are to be your honored guests, Spangler?" Booth asked. "The president and first lady, sir—accompanied by General and Mrs. Grant."

Booth hurried out of the theater without another word. He never collected his mail.

There were friends to be contacted, plans to be drawn up, weapons to be readied—and so little time to do it all. So little time, but such an opportunity! He made straight for Mary Surratt's boardinghouse.

Mary, a plain, plump, dark-haired widow, was Booth's former lover and an ardent Southern sympathizer. She'd met him years before, when he'd been a guest at her family's tavern in Maryland. Though fourteen years his senior, she'd fallen passionately in love with the young actor, and the two had carried on an affair. After her husband died, Mary sold the tavern and moved to Washington, where she opened a small boardinghouse on H Street. Booth was a frequent guest—but in recent years, he'd seemed less interested in "matters of the flesh." Mary's feelings for him, however, remained unchanged. So when Booth asked her to ride out to the old tavern and tell its current owner, John Lloyd, to "make ready the shooting irons," she didn't hesitate. Booth had left a cache of weapons with Lloyd weeks before, in preparation for a failed plot to kidnap Lincoln and exchange him for Confederate prisoners. Now he would use the same weapons to take a more direct approach.

Mary's love for Booth would prove her undoing. For delivering his message, she would hang three months later.

While Mary was on her fatal errand, Booth visited the homes of Lewis Powell and George Atzerodt in quick succession. Both had been involved in his failed kidnapping plot, and both would be needed to carry out the audacious plan that was still taking shape in his head. Atzerodt, an older, rough-looking German immigrant and carriage repairman, was an old acquaintance of Booth's. The boyishly handsome Powell, not yet twenty-two years old, was a former rebel soldier, member of the Confederate Secret Service, and friend of the Surratts. A meeting was arranged for seven that evening. Booth gave no reason for it.

He merely told the men to be on time, and to bring their nerve.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

III

Abe was in fine spirits.

"Laughter shook his office door all morning," wrote Nicolay years later. "At first I mistook the sound for something else—so accustomed had I grown to the president's cheerlessness." Hugh McCullough, Treasury Secretary, remembered "I never saw Mr. Lincoln so merry." Abe had been buoyed by the reunion with his hunters, and by the telegrams flying out of the war office on an almost hourly basis. Lee had surrendered to Ulysses Grant five days earlier at the Appomattox Courthouse in Virginia, effectively bringing the war to a close. Jefferson Davis and his government were on the run.

In order to personally congratulate Ulysses Grant on his brilliant defeat of Robert E. Lee, the Lincolns had invited him and his wife to the theater that evening. There was a new comedy at Ford's, and a few hours of carefree laughter was exactly what the president and Mrs. Lincoln needed. However, the general had respectfully declined, as he and Julia were to leave Washington by train that evening. This set off a flurry of replacement invitations, all of which were promptly (and respectfully) declined for one reason or another. "One would think that we were inviting them to an execution," Mary is reported to have remarked during the course of the day. It mattered little to Abe. No amount of rejection—respectful or otherwise—could sully his mood that warm Good Friday afternoon.

I am strangely buoyant. [Speaker of the House Schuyler] Colfax called this morning to discuss reconstruction, and upon observing me for a quarter hour, paused and asked if I had eschewed my coffee for a Scotch—such was my disposition. Neither the Cabinet nor [Vice President Andrew] Johnson were successful in their efforts to dampen my spirits today (though both tried mightily to do so). However, I dare not speak of this happiness aloud, for Mary would surely see such boastfulness as a bad omen. It has long been her nature—and mine—to distrust these moments of quiet as prelude to some unforeseen disaster. And yet the trees bloom beautifully today, and I cannot help but take note.

The journal entry was dated April 14th, 1865. It was the last

Abe would ever make.

By late afternoon, with the day's official business done, the president prepared to take a late afternoon carriage ride with his wife. Though not as jovial as her husband, Mary also seemed to be in unusually good spirits, and she'd asked Abe to join her for a "brief turn about the yard." As the president stepped out of the North Portico, a one-armed Union soldier (who'd been waiting there most of the day in hopes of such an encounter) shouted, "I would almost give my other hand if I could shake that of Abraham Lincoln!" Abe approached the young man and extended his hand. "You shall do that, and it shall cost you nothing."

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

IV

Booth arrived in Lewis Powell's rented room at seven o'clock sharp, accompanied by a short, nervous twenty-two-year-old pharmacist named David Herold, whom he'd met through Mary Surratt. Atzerodt was already there. Booth wasted no time.

In a few hours, the four of them would bring the Union to its knees.

At precisely ten o'clock, Lewis Powell was to kill Secretary of State William Seward, who was currently bedridden after falling from a carriage. Powell, who was unfamiliar with Washington, would be led to Seward's house by the nervous pharmacist. After the secretary was dead, the two conspirators would ride across the Navy Yard Bridge and into Maryland, where they would meet up with Booth. At the same time, Atzerodt was to shoot Vice President Andrew Johnson in his room at the Kirkwood House, before joining the others in Maryland. As for Booth, he would return to Ford's Theater. There, he would kill the president with a single-shot derringer pistol before plunging a knife into General Grant's heart.

With the Union government decapitated, Jefferson Davis and his Cabinet would have time to reorganize. Confederate generals like Joseph E. Johnston, Meriwether Thompson, and Stand Watie, whose armies were fighting valiantly against the Yankee devils even now, would be able to rearm. From Maryland, Booth and his three companions would continue south, relying on the kindness of their fellow sympathizers for food and shelter while the Union pursued them. As news of their deeds spread, a chorus of joyful voices would ring from Texas to the Carolinas. The tide would turn. They would all be hailed as heroes, and John Wilkes Booth would be called "the Savior of the South."

Atzerodt protested, insisting that he'd agreed to a kidnapping, not a murder. Booth launched into a stirring speech. There is no record of what he said—only that it was soaring and thoroughly convincing. Probably it contained references to Shakespeare. Certainly it had been rehearsed for this very occasion. Whatever Booth's words, they worked. Atzerodt reluctantly agreed to go forward. But what the apprehensive German didn't know—what none of the living conspirators would

ever know, even as they climbed the thirteen steps to their deaths —was the truth behind the young actor's hatred of Lincoln.

On the surface, it made no sense. John Wilkes Booth had been called the "handsomest man in America." Audiences packed theaters all over the country to watch him perform. Women trampled one another to catch a glimpse of him. He'd been born into the nation's preeminent acting family, and made his professional debut as a teenager. Unlike his famous older brothers Edwin and Junius, who were actors in the classic sense, John was raw and instinctive—leaping about the stage, screaming at the top of his lungs. "Every word, no matter how innocuous, seems spoken in anger," wrote a reviewer for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, "and yet one cannot help but be captivated by it. There is an almost ethereal quality to the gentleman."

One night, following a performance of Macbeth at the Richmond Theater, Booth reportedly took six young ladies back to his boardinghouse and wasn't seen for three days. He was rich. He was adored. He was doing what he loved. John Wilkes Booth should have been the happiest man alive.

But he wasn't alive.

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. *

When he was thirteen years old, Johnny Booth paid an old gypsy woman to read his palm. He'd always been obsessed with fate, particularly his own—due in large part to a story often told by his eccentric mother. "On the night you were born," she'd say, "I asked God for a sign of what awaited my newborn son. And God saw fit to answer." For the rest of her life, Mary Ann Booth would swear that flames had suddenly leapt from the hearth of their fireplace and formed the word "country." Johnny spent countless hours pondering the meaning of it. He knew that something special awaited him. He could feel it.

"Oh… a bad hand," the gypsy said at once, recoiling slightly. "Sorrow and trouble… sorrow and trouble, wherever I look." Booth had come expecting a glimpse of his future greatness. What he got were forecasts of doom. "You'll die young," said the gypsy, "but not before amassing a thundering crowd of enemies." Booth protested. She was wrong! She had to be wrong! The gypsy shook her head. Nothing could prevent it….

John Wilkes Booth would "make a bad end."

Seven years later, the first part of her grim fortune came true.

Of the six young women Booth took back to his Richmond boardinghouse that night, only one remained by morning. He'd sent the others scurrying out the door before sunrise, their hair a mess, clothing bundled in their arms. After the fog of whiskey had lifted, he'd found them to be nothing more than the same silly, chatty, opportunistic girls who greeted him at every stage door in every city. He had no use for them beyond what had already transpired.

The girl in bed with him, however, was something entirely different. She was a small, dark-haired, ivory-skinned beauty of twenty or so, but carried herself with the calm confidence of a much older woman. There was a slyness to her, and though she seldom spoke, when she did it was with humor and wisdom. They made love for hours at a time. No woman—not Mary Surratt or his countless stage door conquests—had ever made Booth feel like this. He was drawn to her in a way he'd only been drawn to the theater.

Every woman before her has been a promise unfulfilled.

In moments of rest, Booth filled the silences with stories of his youth: the word "country" in the fire… the gypsy… the inescapable feeling that he was destined for greatness—something more than fame or money could provide. The ivory-skinned girl placed her lips against his ear and told him of a way that he could achieve that greatness. Perhaps he believed her; perhaps he was merely humoring his young lover—but at some point during that second night, John Wilkes Booth willingly drank her blood.

For the next two days, he suffered through the worst, and last, sickness of his life. He drenched his sheets in sweat; suffered horrific visions; convulsed so violently that the legs of his bed clattered against the floor.

Three days after he'd last been seen in public, Booth awoke. He rose and stood in the center of the room—alone. The ivory-skinned girl was gone. He would never learn her name; never see her again. He didn't care. He'd never felt more alive than he did at this moment; never seen or heard with such clarity.

She spoke the truth.

Booth had craved immortality since he was a child. Now it was his. He'd always known that some special fate awaited him. Here it was. He would be the greatest actor of his generation… of every generation. His name would be renowned in ways that Edwin and Junius could only imagine. He would grace the theaters of the world; watch empires crumble to dust; commit every word of Shakespeare to memory. He was the master of time and space. Booth couldn't help but smile as another thought

crossed his mind. The old gypsy was right. He'd died young, just as she said he would. And now he would live forever.

I am a vampire, he thought. God be praised.

Immortality, however, proved somewhat disappointing at first. Like so many vampires, Booth had been left to learn the hard lessons of death on his own. There was no mentor to explain the thousand whispers that now filled his head when he faced an audience. No shopkeeper to suggest the right pair of dark glasses, or the proper means of removing blood from the sleeve of an overcoat. When his first cravings came, crashing against his mind in waves, he'd wandered the dark streets of Richmond for hours, following endless wobbling drunks down endless winding alleys, never quite working up the nerve to strike.

When the cravings became so severe that he felt himself slipping into madness, Booth found his nerve—but not in Richmond. Twenty days after being made immortal, he mounted his horse after dark and set off for a plantation in nearby Charles City. A wealthy tobacco farmer named Harrison had been to see his Hamlet and invited the actor to dine the following week. Booth meant to take him up on that offer a bit earlier.

He tied his horse to a tree in an orchard about eighty yards from the slave quarters—comprised of ten uniformly built, tightly packed brick shelters. Their chimneys were smokeless. Their tiny windows dark. Booth settled on the building nearest him (merely a matter of convenience) and peered through one of its windows. No fire burned inside, and there was hardly any moon in the sky above—yet he saw everything as if it had been illuminated by the gas footlights that blinded him nightly.

A dozen Negroes of varying sex and age slept soundly inside, some on beds, others on woven floor mats. Nearest him, directly below the window, a little girl of seven or eight slept on her stomach in a tattered white nightgown.

Minutes later, Booth was in the orchard, sobbing, her lifeless body in his arms, her blood running down his fangs and chin. He dropped to his knees and held her tightly against his chest.

He was the devil.

Booth felt his fangs puncture the thick muscle of her throat. He began to drink again.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

V

After a full day of respectful rejections, the Lincolns finally had a couple willing to accompany them to the theater. Major Henry Rathbone and his fiancé, Clara Harris, daughter of New York senator Ira Harris, rode backward facing Abe and Mary as the president's carriage cut through a light mist. Mary could feel the cool air in her black silk dress and matching bonnet. Abe was perfectly warm in his black wool overcoat and white gloves. The party pulled up to Ford's Theater just before eight-thirty, by which time the play, Our American Cousin, was already underway. Abe, who detested being late, gave his apologies to the doorman and greeted his relief bodyguard, John F. Parker.

Parker, a Washington policeman, had shown up for his shift at the White House three hours late with no explanation. William H. Crook, Lincoln's daytime bodyguard, angrily sent him ahead to Ford's and told him to wait for the president's party. In time, the nation would learn that Parker was a notorious drinker who'd been disciplined for falling asleep on duty more than once.

Tonight, he was solely responsible for protecting Abraham Lincoln's life.

The Lincolns and their guests were led up a narrow staircase to the double box, where four seats had been arranged. Farthest left was a black walnut rocking chair for the president. Mary was seated beside him, followed by Clara and the major at the far end. No sooner had the four of them taken their seats than the play was halted and the president's arrival announced. Abe stood, somewhat embarrassed, as the orchestra played "Hail to the Chief," and the audience of more than a thousand rose to its feet in polite applause. As the play resumed, John Parker took his seat outside the door. Here, he'd be able to see anyone approaching the president's seats.

Backstage, no one paid much attention to John Wilkes Booth when he arrived an hour after Abe's party. He was a regular at Ford's, free to come and go as he pleased, and he often took in performances from the wings. But Booth had no interest in the play tonight; no time for small talk with impressionable young actresses. Using his knowledge of the theater's layout, he wound his way through a labyrinth of hallways and crawl spaces until he

reached the staircase that led to the stage left boxes. Here, he was shocked to discover that there were no guards posted. Booth had expected at least one, and had planned on using his fame to gain access to the president. A great actor paying his respects to a great man. He was carrying a calling card in his coat pocket for this very purpose.

There was nothing but an empty chair.

John Parker had grown frustrated by the fact that he couldn't see the stage. Incredibly, during the second act, he'd simply left his post to find another seat. By the beginning of Act III, Parker had left the theater altogether, going for a drink at the Star Saloon next door. Now, all that stood between Booth and Lincoln was a narrow staircase.

Upstairs, Mary Lincoln held her husband's hand. She stole a glance at Clara Harris, whose hands were resting modestly in her lap, and whispered in Abe's ear, "What will Ms. Harris think of my hanging on to you so?"

"She won't think anything of it."

Most historians agree that these are Abraham Lincoln's last words.

Booth quietly climbed the staircase and stood outside the box, waiting for the one line that he knew would get a huge laugh.

A laugh big enough to muffle the sound of a pistol.

Onstage, Harry Hawk stood alone, delivering a spirited soliloquy to the crowd. Booth held steady, waiting, as Hawk's voice boomed through the theater. He crept forward, leveled the pistol at the back of Lincoln's head, and carefully… carefully pulled the hammer back. If Abe had been ten years younger, he might have heard the click—might've reacted with the speed and strength that had saved his life so many times before. But he was old. Tired. All he felt was Mary's hand upon his. All he heard was Harry Hawk's booming voice: "Don't know the manners of good society, eh? Well, I guess I know enough to turn you inside out, old gal; you sockdologizing old man-trap!"

The audience roared. Booth fired.

The ball entered Abe's skull, and he slumped forward in his rocking chair, unconscious. Mary's screams joined the deafening laughter as Booth produced a hunting knife and turned to his next target—but instead of General Grant, he was met by the young Major Rathbone, who leapt from his chair and came at him. Booth plunged the knife into Rathbone's bicep and made for the railing. Clara's screams joined Mary's as laughter gave way to murmuring and people turned their heads toward the commotion.

Rathbone grabbed Booth's coat with his good arm, but couldn't hold on. Booth leapt over the railing. But as he did, one of his riding spurs snagged the Treasury flag that Edmund Spangler had put up earlier in the day. Booth fell awkwardly to the stage, breaking his left leg, twisting it grotesquely at the knee.

FIG. 6E. - A BLACK-EYED JOHN WILKES BOOTH FIRES THE FATAL SHOT AS MAJOR HENDRY RATHBONE REACTS

Though injured, the consummate actor couldn't resist a flourish. He pulled himself to his feet, faced the audience, which had begun to panic, and yelled, "Sic semper tyrannis!" The state motto of Virginia. Thus always to tyrants! With that, John Wilkes Booth left the stage for the last time.

Like the speech to his conspirators, it was a moment he'd probably rehearsed.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

VI

At roughly the same moment, Lewis Powell ran out of Secretary Seward's front door, screaming, "I'm mad! I'm mad!" Although he didn't know it yet, his mission had been a failure.

Herold, the nervous pharmacist, had done his part. He'd led Powell to Seward's mansion. Now he watched from a safe distance as Powell knocked on the front door just after ten o'clock. When a butler answered, Powell delivered his own carefully rehearsed line: "Good evening. I have medicine for the secretary. I alone am to administer it." Moments later, he was on the second floor, only a few yards from where his ailing target slept. But before he could slip into Seward's room alone, the secretary's son Frederick approached.

"What cause have you to see my father?"

Powell repeated his carefully rehearsed line, word for word. But the younger Seward wasn't convinced. Something was amiss. He told Powell that his father was asleep, and to call again in the morning.

Lewis Powell had no choice. He drew his revolver, pointed it at Frederick's head, and squeezed the trigger. Nothing. The gun had misfired.

I'm mad! I'm mad!

There was no time. Powell bashed Frederick's skull with the gun instead, sending him to the floor, blood pouring from his nose and ears. Powell then ran into his target's room, where he encountered a screaming Fanny Seward, the secretary's daughter. Ignoring her for the moment, he drew his knife and brought it down on the old man's face and neck, again and again and again, until he rolled onto the floor—dead.

Or so Powell thought. Seward was wearing a metal neck brace as a result of his carriage accident. Despite deep gashes to his face, the blade failed to find his jugular.

Powell stabbed Fanny Seward in the hands and arms as he ran past her and into the hallway. Continuing down the staircase, another of the secretary's children, Augustus, and an overnight guest, Sergeant Robinson, tried to stop him. Both were stabbed for their efforts, as was Emerick Hansell, a telegram messenger who'd had the misfortune to arrive at the front door just as

Powell was running out of it.

Incredibly, none of the victims died.

Outside, the nervous pharmacist was nowhere to be found. The sound of Fanny Seward's screams had frightened him off. Powell, who knew little of the area, was left to fend for himself. He threw the bloody knife into a nearby gutter, untied his horse, and galloped off into the night.

As disastrous as the attack on Seward had been, Powell could have consoled himself in the knowledge that he'd fared far better than George Atzerodt. The reluctant German had lost his nerve, gotten drunk in the bar at the vice president's boardinghouse, and then wandered the streets of Washington until sunrise.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

VII

Charles Leale, twenty-three, helped his fellow soldiers lower the president onto a bed on the first floor of Petersen's Boarding House—directly across the street from Ford's Theater. They were forced to lay him diagonally, as he was too tall to lie straight. Leale, an army surgeon who'd been in the audience, had been the first to attend to the president. He'd shoved his way through the crowd, up the narrow stairs, and into the box, where he'd found Lincoln slumped over in his chair. Upon lowering the president and examining him, he'd detected no pulse; no breath. Moving quickly, the young doctor had felt around the back of Lincoln's head until he'd found a hole just behind the left ear. After a blood clot was removed from the wound, Lincoln had begun to breathe again.

Leale was young, but he wasn't naive. He'd seen enough of these injuries in the field to know the outcome. Minutes after the president had been shot, he'd delivered his bleak, accurate medical opinion: "His wound is mortal. It is impossible for him to recover."

Mary couldn't bear to be in the room with her dying husband. She remained in the parlor of Petersen's Boarding House all night, weeping. Robert and Tad arrived sometime after midnight and took their place at Abe's bedside, just as Abe had knelt at his dying mother's side almost fifty years earlier. They were joined by Gideon Welles, Edwin Stanton, and an endless parade of Washington's best doctors, all of whom came to offer their advice. But nothing could be done. Dr. Robert King Stone, the Lincolns' family physician, examined the president during the night and concluded that his case was "hopeless."

It was only a matter of time.

By sunrise, a large crowd had gathered outside. The president's breathing had become increasingly faint through the night, his heartbeat erratic. He was cool to the touch. Many of the doctors remarked that a wound of this type would have killed most men in two hours; maybe less. Abe had lasted nine. But then, Abe Lincoln had always been different. Abe Lincoln had always lived.

The infant a mother attended and loved;

The mother that infant's affection who proved;
The husband that mother and infant who blessed,
Each, all, are away to their dwellings of rest. *

Abraham Lincoln died at 7:22 in the morning, on the Ides of April 1865.

The men at his bedside lowered their heads in prayer. When they were finished, Edwin Stanton declared, "Now he belongs to the ages." With that, he returned to his telegrams. John Wilkes Booth was on the run, and Stanton meant to catch him.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

VIII

Booth and Herold had managed to elude the Union Army for eleven days, escaping first to Maryland, then to Virginia. They'd hidden in swamps for days on end; slept on beds of cold earth. Booth had expected to be embraced as a hero, the Savior of the South. Instead, he'd been cast out into the cold. "Ya gone too far," they'd said. "The Yanks'll burn every farm from Baltimore to Birmingham lookin' fer ya."

The second of the gypsy's predictions had come true. Booth had amassed a "thundering crowd of enemies."

On April 26th, Booth woke to shouting, and knew at once.

Goddamned double-crossing son of a bitch…

Richard Garrett had been one of the few Virginians who hadn't turned them away. He'd given them food to eat and a warm tobacco barn to sleep in. Judging by the Union soldiers outside, he'd sold them out for the reward money, too.

Herold was nowhere to be found. The coward gave himself up. It didn't matter. He would be faster on his own, anyway. Night had fallen, and the night belonged to Booth's kind. Let them wait, he thought. Let them wait and see what I am. His leg had long since healed, and even though he was weak with hunger, they would be no match for him. Not in the dark.

"Give yerself up, Booth! We ain't gonna warn ya again!"

Booth stayed put. True to their word, the Union soldiers issued no further warnings. They simply set fire to the barn. Boards were set alight; torches thrown onto the roof. The dry old barn was engulfed in a matter of seconds. The blinding flames made the barn's dark corners seem deeper. Booth put his dark glasses on as ancient beams began to creak overhead, and fingers of gray smoke crawled up the walls. He stood center stage and tugged on the bottom of his coat—an old actor's habit. He wanted to look his best for this. He wanted the Yankee devils to see exactly who it was before they…

Someone is in here with me… someone who means me harm….

Booth turned in circles, ready for an attack that might come from any direction, at any moment. His fangs descended; his pupils swelled until his eyes were nothing more than black

marbles. He was ready for anything….

But there was nothing. Nothing but smoke, and flame, and shadow.

What sort of trickery is this? Why could I not sense him until…

"Because you are weak…"

Booth spun in the direction of the man's voice.

Henry Sturges stepped out of the darkest corner of the barn. "… and you think too much."

He means to destroy me….

Somehow, Booth understood everything. Perhaps this stranger wanted him to understand—forced him to understand.

"You would destroy me over a living man?" Booth backed up as Henry advanced.

"OVER A LIVING MAN?"

Henry said nothing. There was a time and a place for words. His fangs descended; his eyes turned.

These are the last seconds of my life.

Booth couldn't help but smile.

The old gypsy was right….

John Wilkes Booth was about to make a bad end.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

FOURTEEN

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

Home

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.”

—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

August 28th, 1963

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

I

Abraham Lincoln had a dream.

He watched his prey move among the men below; watched how confidently it circled them. Choosing. Glaring at them like a god. Mocking them; reveling in their helplessness. But you, he thought. You're the helpless one tonight.

Just a moment now. Just another moment and it would begin. A series of rehearsed movements. A performance refined with each passing night. Perfected. Just a moment, and then the force and commotion and speed. He would stare into the blackness of its eyes and watch the life leave them forever. And then it would be over. For tonight.

He was twenty-five again, and strong. He was so strong. All of the sorrows in his life—all of the doubts and deaths and disappointments—all of them had been for this. They were the fires that burned in his chest. They were his strength. They were her. There was a prayer that came to mind in these moments. Before the screaming. Before the bargaining and the blood. He wasn't much for prayers, but he liked this one:

If my enemies be quick, grant me speed. If they be strong, Lord, then grant me the strength to see them defeated. For mine has always been the side of righteousness. The side of justice. The side of light.

His ax blade had been sharpened and resharpened. If I swung it hard enough, I could make the air bleed. Over the years, the handle had been worn into the perfect companion for his massive hands. Each furrow a welcoming friend. It was hard to know where he ended and the ax began. Impossible to know how much…

Now.

He leapt from the barn roof and soared over his prey. The creature looked up. Its eyes went black from lid to lid. Its fangs descended, hollow and hungry. He swung the ax with all of that strength and felt the handle leave his hands, his body still high above the earth. As he fell, he caught one of their faces in the corner of his eye. The face of a helpless man, frightened and bewildered. Not yet aware that his life had just been saved. I'm not doing this for you, he thought. I'm doing it for her. He

watched his old friend somersault through the air… wood metal wood metal wood metal. He knew. From the moment he let it go, he knew the blade would find its target. Knew the sound it would make when it broke through the skull of that false god, splitting its confident smile in two… tearing through its brain… denying it everlasting life. He knew because this was his purpose.

It had always been his purpose….

Abe woke in his White House office.

He dressed and sat at a small desk by one of the windows overlooking the South Lawn. It was a perfect late August morning.

It's good to be in Washington. It feels strange to write those words, but then—I suppose I've been swept up in the excitement of the day. It promises to be a historic one. I only pray that it's remembered for the right reasons, and not for the violence that some have predicted (and others hoped for). It's not yet eight o'clock, but I can already see the crowds marching across the Ellipse toward the Monument. How many will there be? Who will speak, and how will their speeches be received? We will know in a few short hours. I only wish they had chosen a different venue. I admit that it causes me no small discomfort to be near that thing. I was surprised, however, at what little discomfort I felt sleeping in my office. It is fitting, I suppose. For it was here, in this very room, that I signed my name to the ancestor of this day. I must remember to send President Kennedy a note of thanks for having me as his guest.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

II

On the morning of April 21st, 1865, Abraham Lincoln's funeral train left Washington and began the journey home to Springfield.

Thousands lined the tracks as the "Lincoln Special" pulled away from the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Depot at five minutes past eight o'clock, its nine cars draped in black garlands, a framed portrait of the late president hanging over the steam engine's cowcatcher. Tearful men stood with their hats in their hands; ladies with their heads bowed. Soldiers, some of whom had left their beds at St. Elizabeths Hospital to see the train off, stood up arrow straight, saluting their fallen commander in chief.

Two of Abe's sons were aboard with him, Robert, now a twenty-one-year-old army captain, and Willie, whose coffin had been removed from its temporary crypt and placed beside his father's. Tad remained in Washington with Mary, who was too grief stricken to leave the White House. For thirteen days and nearly 1,700 miles, the train wound its way through the North, stopping in designated cities to lie in state. In Philadelphia, 300,000 people pushed and shoved to catch a glimpse of the slain president's body. In New York, 500,000 stood in line to lay eyes on Abe, and a six-year-old Theodore Roosevelt watched his funeral procession go by. In Chicago, hundreds of thousands gathered around an outdoor viewing stand engraved with the words "Faithful to Right—Martyr to Justice."

In all, more than twelve million people stood by the tracks to watch the funeral train pass, and more than a million waited in line to view the president's open casket.

On Thursday, May 4th, 1865, a sea of black umbrellas shielded thousands of mourners from the scorching sun as Abe's casket, sealed for all eternity, was carried into Oak Ridge Cemetery on a hearse pulled by six white horses.

As Bishop Matthew Simpson gave a stirring eulogy for the "Savior of the Union," one particularly ashen mourner looked on from behind a pair of dark glasses, a black parasol in his gloved hands. Though his eyes were incapable of tears, he felt the loss of Abraham Lincoln more deeply than any living person in Springfield that day.

Henry remained by the closed gates of the receiving vault (where Abe and Willie's caskets would remain until a permanent tomb could be built) long after the sun had set and the crowds dispersed, standing guard over his friend of forty years. Standing guard over the man who'd saved a nation from enslavement and driven darkness back into the shadows. He remained there most of the night, sometimes sitting in silent contemplation, sometimes reading the little slips of paper that people had left along with flowers and keepsakes at the foot of the iron bars. Henry found one of them particularly moving. It read simply:

"I am a foe to tyrants, and my country's friend." *

In 1871, Tad Lincoln—then living with his mother in Chicago—was stricken with tuberculosis. He died on July 15th at the age of eighteen. His body was taken to Springfield and placed in his father's tomb beside brothers Willie and Eddy. Again, it was Robert who accompanied the funeral train, as Mary was too distraught to attend.

Of all Abe's children, only Robert survived to see the new century. He would marry and father three children of his own, and in later life, he would serve two presidents, James Garfield and Chester A. Arthur, as secretary of war. He died peacefully at his estate in Vermont in 1926, at the age of eighty-two.

Tad's death had been the final, irreparable blow to Mary Lincoln's mental health. In the years that followed, she became increasingly erratic, often swearing that she saw her late husband's face staring at her from the darkness on nighttime walks. She suffered from paranoia, insisting that strangers were trying to poison her or steal from her. She once had $56,000 worth of government bonds sewn into the linings of her petticoats for safekeeping. After Mary attempted suicide, Robert had no choice but to commit his mother to a psychiatric hospital. After her release, Mary moved back to Springfield, where she died in 1882, at the age of sixty-three. She was laid to rest beside the three young sons she'd wept for in life.

There would be several attempts to steal Abraham Lincoln's body following the Civil War—until, at Robert Lincoln's request, the casket was covered with cement in 1901, never to be seen again. None of the would-be grave robbers had had much success. In fact, none had even managed to pry the president's heavy casket lid open.

If they had, they would have been shocked by what they found.

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

III

On August 28th, 1963, Henry Sturges stood in front of the Lincoln Memorial, his clothing and hair in keeping with the times, a black umbrella protecting his skin and dark glasses covering his eyes. He was accompanied by an uncommonly tall friend, his eyes behind a pair of Ray-Bans; his shoulder-length brown hair beneath a floppy brimmed hat. A bushy beard obscured his angular face, the same one staring down at him from its marble throne (and causing him no shortage of discomfort). Both listened intently, proudly, as a young black preacher looked out on more than 250,000 faces.

"Five score years ago," the preacher began, "a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity. But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free."

Abe and Henry had come to help finish the work begun a century before. They'd been there during Reconstruction, driving out the vampires who continued to terrorize emancipated slaves….

"I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood."

They'd been there in Mississippi, dragging white-hooded devils to their deaths by the light of burning crosses….

"Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children."

And they'd been there in Europe, where millions gave their lives defeating the second vampire uprising between 1939 and 1945.

But there was still work to be done.

"Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

The crowd cheered wildly, and the preacher took his seat. It was a perfect late-summer day. A defining day in man's struggle

for freedom. Not unlike the day Abraham Lincoln was laid to rest, ninety-eight years before.

The day Henry made a choice…

… that some men are just too interesting to die.

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